

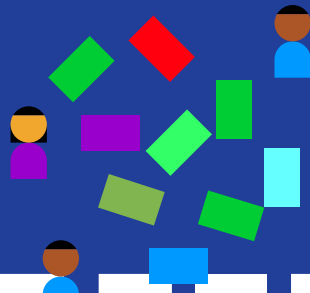
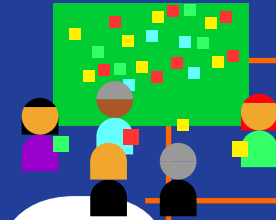
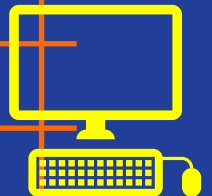
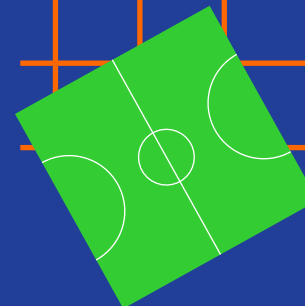
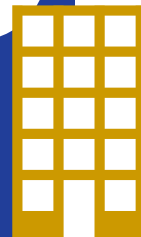
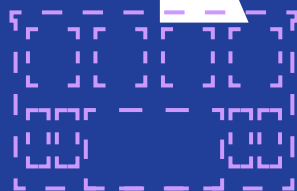
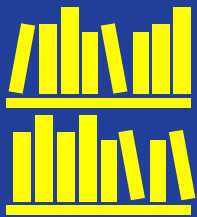
VAN  
ALEN

COME IN!

# BUILDING EQUITY

INSTITUTE

NYC  
DDC Department of  
Design and  
Construction

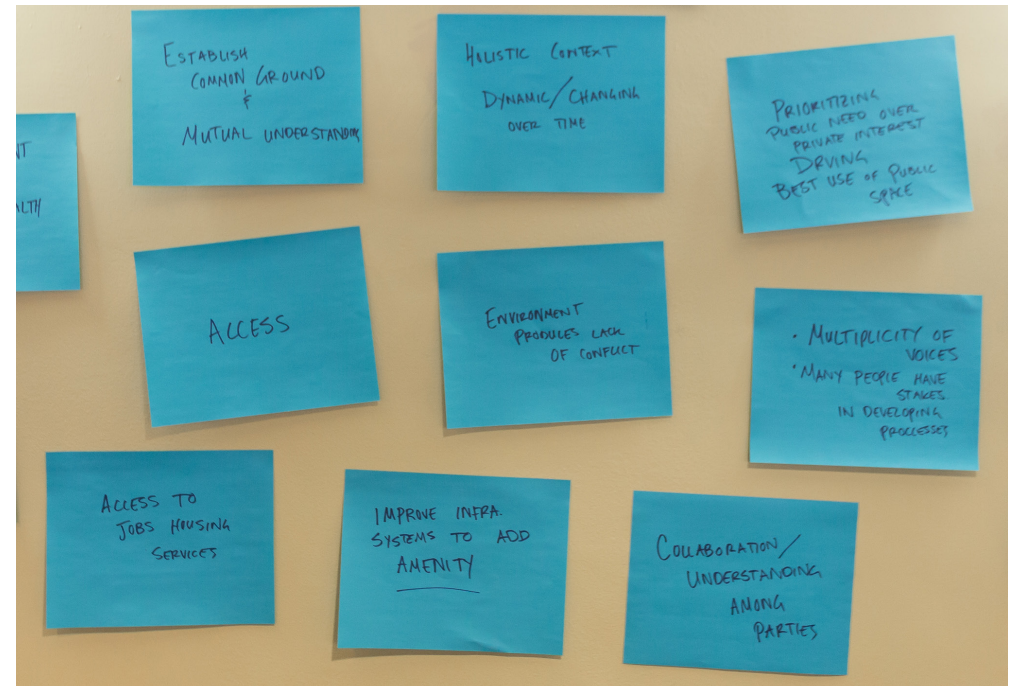
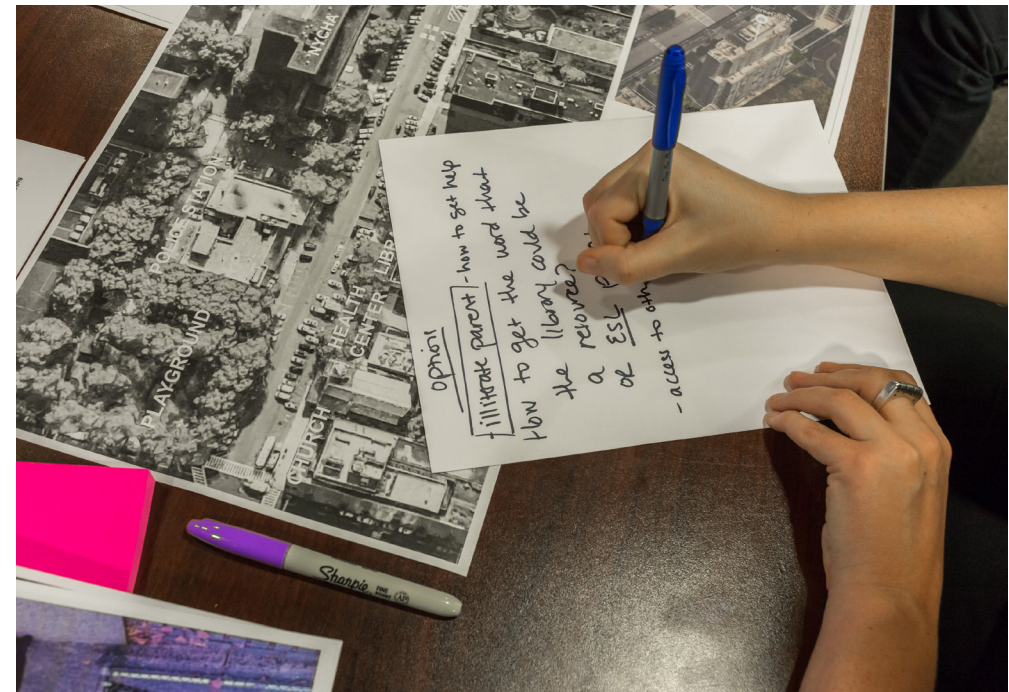


# INTRODUCTION

Our firehouses, daycare and senior centers, police precincts, libraries, and dozens of other public facilities are some of our most important shared spaces, as well as powerful physical and symbolic reminders of the role government plays in our everyday lives. How can designers, government officials, residents, and many other stakeholders ensure that these civic spaces truly serve everyone equitably?

To approach this question, [New York City Department of Design and Construction \(DDC\)](#) and [Van Alen Institute](#) collaborated on *Building Equity*, a series of workshops to explore how civic buildings and infrastructure can be more equitable. Workshop participants were a multifarious range of community members, social service advocates, artists, law enforcement officers, researchers, cultural leaders, policymakers, planners, and designers. They were united by their frequent use of public buildings and services.

*Building Equity* culminated in five propositions for how designers and policymakers can integrate equity when giving form to public buildings. Enlivened by quotes, photographs, and examples from workshop participants, the propositions can be applied to a range of design projects in New York and beyond. They are launching points for the continued growth in knowledge of designers, city agencies, and policymakers working in the ever-evolving urban sphere.



# THE NEW YORK WORKSHOPS

## Workshop I: Bloomingdale Library



In December 2015, workshop participants joined forces at the NYC Bloomingdale Library to tour and discuss a cluster of public buildings and the space that unites them around the Riverside Health Center on 100th Street, near Amsterdam Avenue in Manhattan. This site was selected for its high concentration of public buildings on one neighborhood block. Working together, the participants reflected on the potential for service sharing and mutual reinforcement among the local organizations at the site.

### Participants

**Drew Berner**, Bloomingdale Library  
**Ana Crenovich**, P.S. 163, Alfred E. Smith School  
**Julia Day**, Gehl Architects  
**Susannah Drake**, DLANDstudio  
**Stephen Jones**, 24th Precinct Community Affairs  
**John McDonnell**, 24th Precinct Community Affairs  
**Besiki Kutateladze**, CUNY Institute for State and Local Governance  
**Gita Nandan**, Thread Collective  
**Kevin Quinn**, NYC Department of Parks & Recreation  
**Katie Riley**, NYC Department of Parks & Recreation  
**Joel Stillman**, Normal Number  
**Shirley Williams**, 830 Amsterdam Avenue Tenants Association  
**Sarah Wolf**, NYC Department of Health

## Workshop II: Langston Hughes Community Library



In February 2016, workshop participants explored the neighborhoods surrounding the Langston Hughes Community Library: Corona, East Elmhurst, Jackson Heights, and Flushing. Corona was at one time predominantly an African-American community, and the library's substantial collection of African and African-American art represents that heritage. Over the past 15–20 years it has evolved into a primarily Latino neighborhood. Participants considered this demographic shift when raising questions about how public buildings can be designed to remain relevant and welcoming as their surrounding users' change.

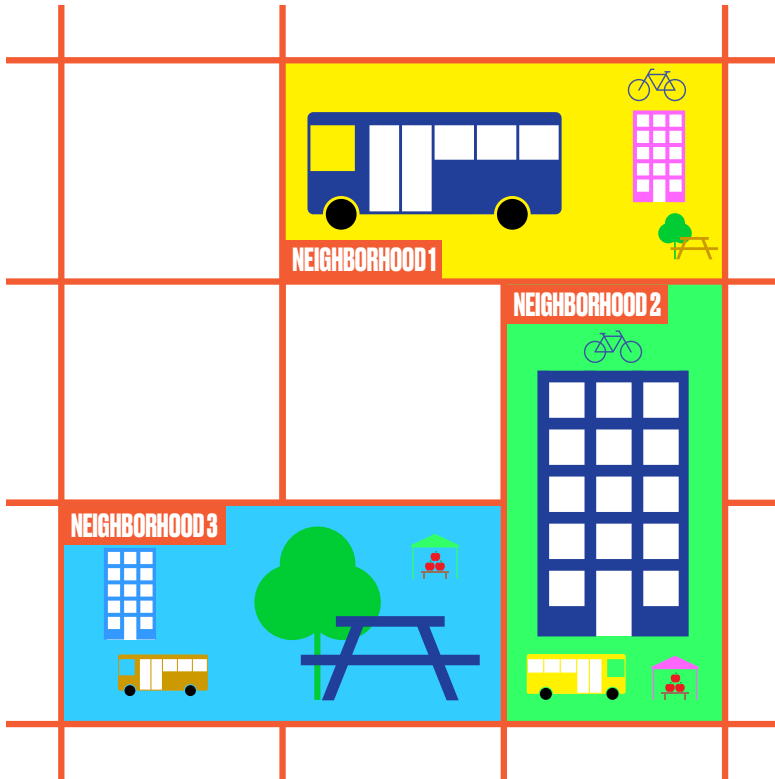
### Participants

**Andrew Burdick**, Ennead Lab  
**Arli Cornejal**, Queens Neighborhoods United  
**John Crow**, Langston Hughes Community Library  
**Eilidh Dickson**, Copenhagen Institute of Interaction Design  
**Beatriz Gil**, Hibidros Collective  
**Larinda Hooks**, Elmcors Youth & Adult Activities  
**Sahar Khan**, Chhaya CDC  
**Isabelle Leighton**, Asian Americans for Equality  
**Clara Londono**, Plaza del Sol Health Clinic  
**Prerana Reddy**, Queens Museum  
**Jessica Sanclemente-Gomez**, NYC Housing Preservation & Development  
**Rachel Schwartz**, Public Health Solutions  
**Eduardo Staszowski**, Parsons DESIS Lab  
**Lester Youngblood**, NAACP Corona



# 1

## TO TREAT NEIGHBORHOODS EQUITABLY, TREAT THEM DIFFERENTLY



**“For so many, the public plaza or the library functions as a living room. In dense, lower-income neighborhoods, public amenities can provide space and services to residents that often can’t be accessed at home.”**

**“Be cautious of scripting gendered spaces.”**

Different neighborhoods have varied needs, and statistics do not tell enough of the story. Yes, numbers of elderly inhabit some neighborhoods, while others overflow with young families. Older, single people may feel isolated in some communities. Meanwhile, daycare and transportation options in some city corridors may severely limit whether and where a single parent with children can work. Services and the spaces they use must adapt with the lives of their local inhabitants. With neighborhoods and cityscapes perpetually in flux, designers, and the agencies that hire them, must invest in determining local needs, and make sure that resources and services are available to meet real—if sometimes new—needs.

For designers and policymakers, the difference between “equity” and “equality” is crucial. An equal provision of government resources will inevitably offer more than is needed in some communities and underserve others. An equity approach assesses essential services and amenities, especially in traditionally under-resourced communities, and focuses on populations that can be hard to reach: those vulnerable to homelessness, those isolated from health services, and those likely to be heavily impacted by disasters or a personal misfortune, for example.

### Ideas for Further Thinking

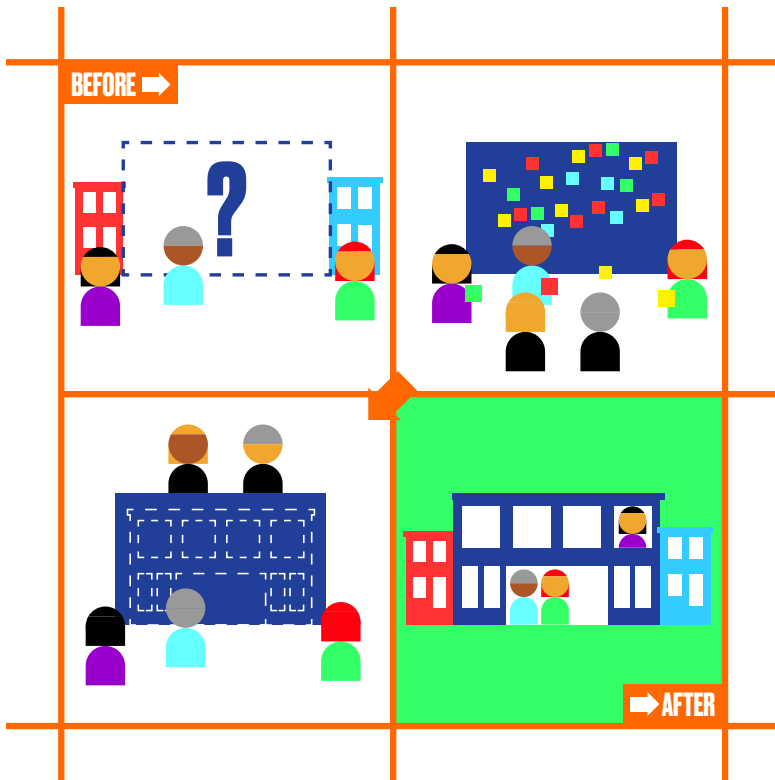
- To determine what a neighborhood needs, government agencies can perform a **needs analysis**. As part of this analysis, members of a community can get together, determine their own needs, and advocate for them. In this way, outcomes are much more likely to reflect the priorities neighborhoods set for themselves. Neighborhoods also make their priorities known and budgeted through community boards in the form of Statements of Community District Needs.

Workshop members suggested a number of key public services and amenities that could stem from this needs analysis, including:

- A respectful, not simply code-compliant, approach to wheelchair accessibility
- Charging stations that allow community members to charge their communication devices in a shared, public space. The charging station could also provide information about local events



# 2 NURTURE COMMUNITY HISTORIES AND INSPIRE LOCAL OWNERSHIP



**“A space can create anxiety if it’s not clear where to go or what to do. People are afraid to take ownership of the space.”**

**“...a space needs to stand for something!”**



What does a building signify within the larger context of its surrounding neighborhood? Buildings and spaces are encircled by social, cultural, and built emblems of their local community life. Not all local voices and stories are heard, however. Some are obliterated over time. Peoples’ “histories”—in the broadest sense—can do much to make public services and structures effective, accepted, and nurtured.

Great public design is a balancing act. It succeeds when residents are able to articulate their needs and work collaboratively with agencies and design teams in the development of a project scope. This process is not about one kind of aesthetic versus another. It is about the stance a design project takes to its surroundings — an insightful, not knee-jerk, approach to context — and the relevance of a space’s function to needs, both present and future, so that likely futures can be understood.

A successful, collaborative building-design process is much more likely to result in acceptance by community members and civic leaders. Such projects will inspire stewardship over time.

## Ideas for Further Thinking

- Build in moments in the design timeline for members of the surrounding community to advocate for certain programmatic and architectural elements.
- Aim for aesthetics that are not entirely ‘new’ to the local context, but that reinvent and celebrate the past history of the community. A design that is too different from its surroundings will not endure.

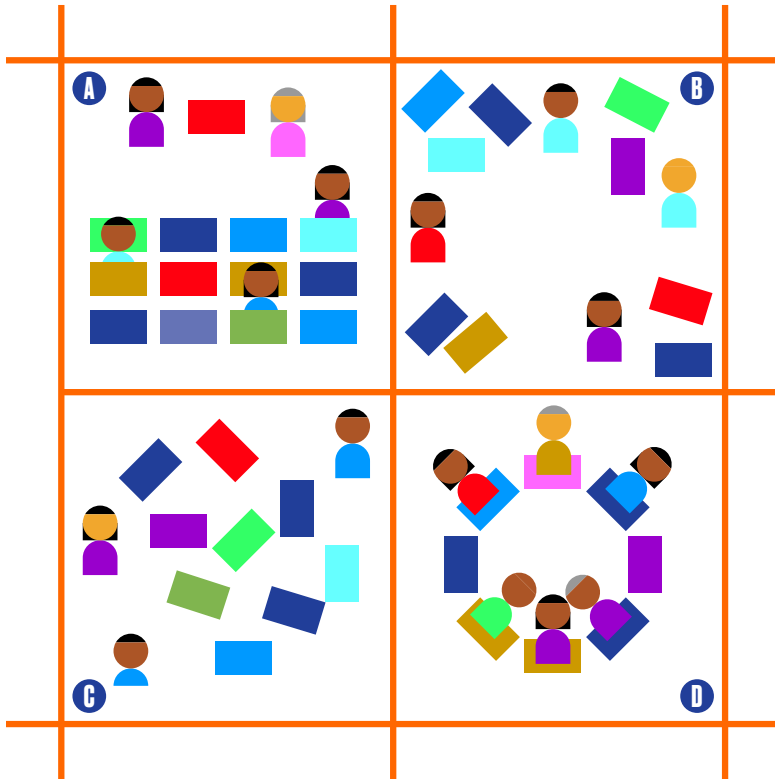
Workshop participants proposed ways to bring community needs and evolving priorities into the design process:

- **Pre-Design Partner** with local schools, community organizations, and universities. Hire youth volunteers in exchange for course credit. By establishing early relationships with neighborhood stakeholders, designers and policymakers generate long-term connections that promote engagement and develop local leadership.
- **Design** A result of community participation has been the use of police muster rooms as a community-meeting places. An example is the prominent incorporation of a community room in the new 40th Precinct station. However, greater engagement in the precinct by the public means that someone reporting a crime may come face-to-face with the person being accused, since both must come to the supervisor at the main desk. The next step would be exploring the separation of publicly accessible areas from those where arrests are handled.



# 3

## SOME SPACES SHOULD NEVER BE FINISHED



“Youth feel like, ‘don’t tell me what to do, but give me enough structure to do something.’ Don’t force someone’s hand.”

“Design buildings like software — constantly evolving.”

Good public spaces are alive; they shape-shift with changing times and resources. Designers must find a happy medium between over-designed and purely flexible spaces, providing subtle cues to use without “forcing someone’s hand.”

Some public-building designs can be quite intricate: libraries with special areas for children, elderly, and adults; museums with a special room for every collection. Yet change, not stasis, is the norm for most facilities. Spaces that are too specific can become obsolete.

On the other hand, pure flexibility can be unwise. A plaza with broad, paved areas for celebrations can look bleak when unoccupied. Insightful design anticipates changing needs. An alluring paving and furniture pattern can make even an empty plaza feel alive. Maybe a library meeting room is created only when needed with readily demounted partitions. Or, special reading areas are denoted with furniture instead of architectural walls.

### Ideas for Further Thinking

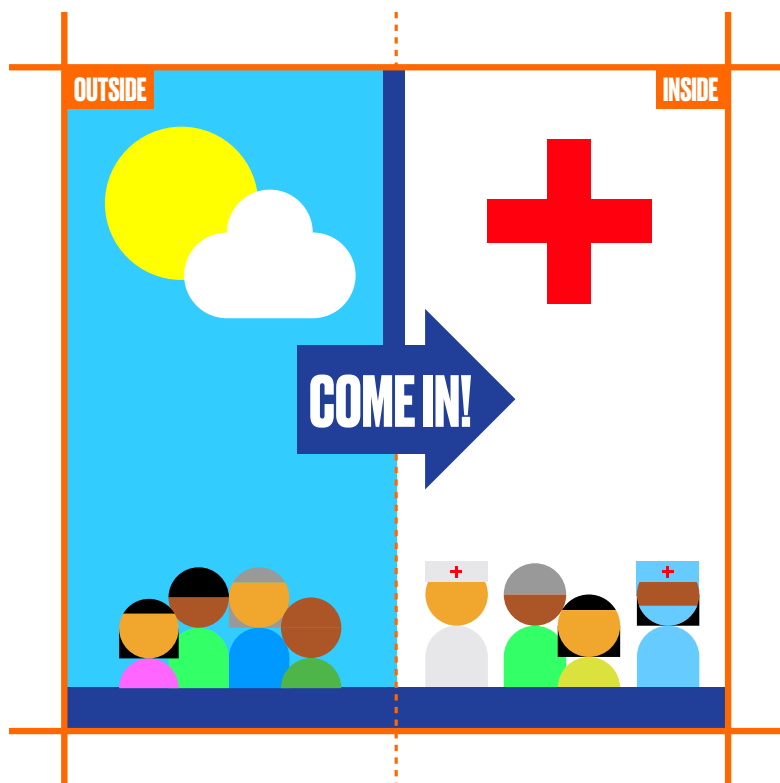
- Encourage multiplicity of use through design: Designate the entrance of a civic building as public space.
- Provide multifunctional infrastructure that can be adjusted over time.
- Use signage to promote clearly (in many languages and through graphics) the process for hosting programming and events in a space.

Workshop participants proposed several examples of buildings with flexible-use public spaces, including:

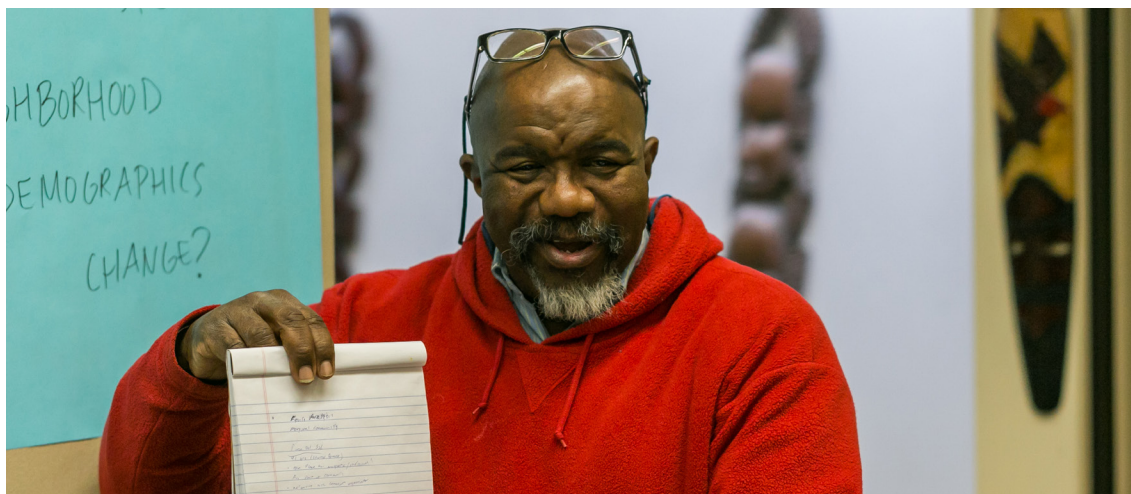
- **The Brooklyn Museum Lobby** The ground-floor lobby of the Brooklyn Museum operates as a public space completely visible from the museum’s exterior public plaza. Visitors and neighborhood dwellers can enter the vast museum entrance and lobby without a ticket and enjoy amenities such as the bookshop, a café, seating, charging stations, and occasional exhibitions at no cost. Here, community members can define and see themselves in a historically relevant space. They can overcome preconceptions about who the space is for and what uses it can be put to.



# 4 DESIGN SHOULD SAY “THIS SPACE IS FOR YOU”



**“There’s nothing for adolescents in NYC. They are told to be quiet in the library. If they go to parks, they have to hang out near little kids. Teens just need opens space that are welcoming. It’s hard to imagine a place to be. People fear youth, but teenagers are creative — how do you harness boisterousness?”**



Designers are trained to create buildings and spaces that have clear intentions and identities — buildings that make a “statement,” sometimes boldly. The workshops suggested that this is not always the right approach. An architect may design a grand entrance that locals find intimidating. An abstract composition may be sculpturally elegant while offering too few cues for its use. Young people, especially, can feel stigmatized by architecture if they live in public housing “projects,” or feel hectored by people in authority if they gather on street corners.

A better approach for designers is to make sure the purpose of the building or environment is absolutely clear and that the invitation to its users is explicit. A workshop participant discussed a non-profit health center that was appreciated because passersby could look in from the street through large windows, and see “people like them” using services. A government facility was feared because it was opaque, did not clearly indicate that services were offered in languages other than English and did not convey that immigration status would not prevent access to services. Cultural and historical cues can appeal to locals without alienating users who can’t “read” those cues. Clear wayfinding communicates that all people are entitled to use a facility.

## Ideas for Further Thinking

- Buildings that deliver social services should provide welcoming, comfortable, and generous waiting areas. Facilities should offer privacy for visitors when warranted, like spaces for mothers to feed or change infants.
- To promote feelings of safety, designs should be well-lit and should not provide hiding places for criminals. People feel more comfortable seeing where they are going and what is likely to happen. Opaque doors along long, dim hallways can be frightening.
- Buildings that are mid-block and hidden from view can be visually announced at street corners, guiding visitors to the entrance through design, creative signage, or murals.

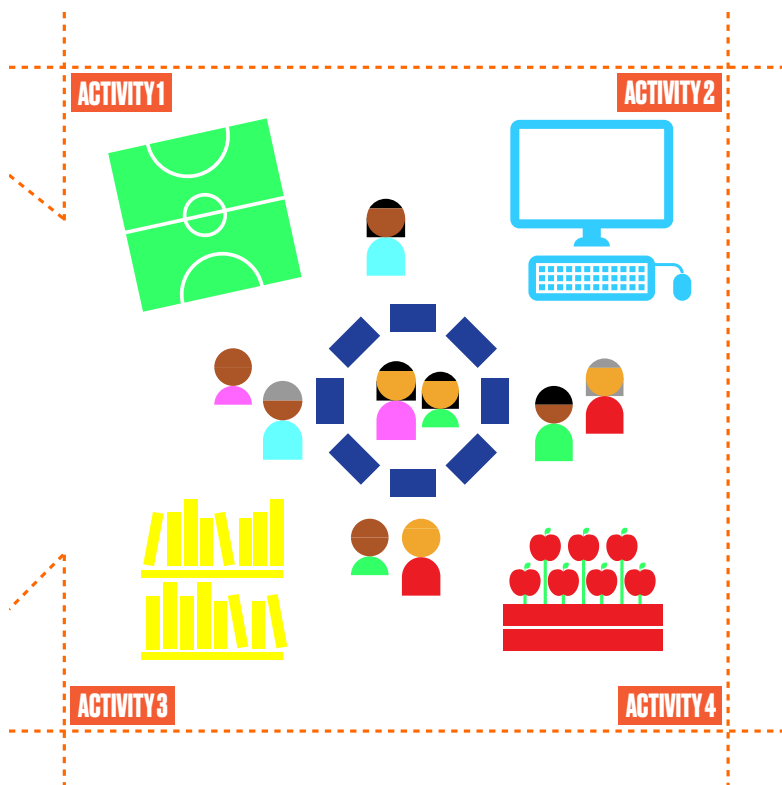
Workshop participants proposed several examples of welcoming buildings, including:

- **Plaza del Sol Community Health Center**  
Plaza del Sol Community Health Center in Corona, Queens has large open windows where passersby can see children and other families of similar socioeconomic and ethnic identity, which encourages other residents, including those with language barriers, to feel comfortable seeking out needed services.



# 5

## EQUITY “GETS IT TOGETHER”



“Youth would be bereft without technology, but the key is to get them engaged even when they have a phone with them. Design should make **technology** present but incidental, so you can bring your device, but it’s about sharing activities and space.”

“[Good public space is] a respite for the city. It ties you back to the earth.”

Equitable spaces provide as many opportunities as possible for people to come together — our public buildings and spaces should serve as **societal common denominators**, places where we meet our neighbors as needs are met. To bring people out, designers could aim to create the ‘non-community center community center’ — an experience that promotes interaction and provides intergenerational activities without the stigma of a typical community center, an idea that could seem antiquated and unattractive to young people.

The non-community center could be unfinished, ready for appropriation by users themselves to suit needs they define. The workshop participants suggested ideas like kitchens to learn to cook, or roof gardens that rely on community cooperation to succeed. The center could also offer gaming spaces that switch to a job skills training hub at night. In offering both passive and active activities, the center would have the ability to appeal to broader audiences with different aims. In the non-community center, the space a book club needs for contemplative discussion has the capacity, in a matter of minutes, to evolve into a vibrant venue for local jazz, or an orderly site of booths for the local farmer’s market.

Another way designers can achieve this is through **aggregated public services**. Buildings can cross-offer programs that increase overall use.

### Ideas for Further Thinking

- Consider whether a facility like the non-community center community center could make sense for a population to be served. Think through the most creative ways to bring people of different backgrounds together. Give these people impetuses to experiment and play with their environment.
  - Create stronger links between public services — libraries, health clinics, etc. — so that people can obtain needed services without making multiple stops. Co-locating gardens and libraries could generate more enriching user experiences, for example.
  - Build in transition spaces at the entrances of new buildings to provide unprogrammed areas to meet and gather without requiring people to show that they are “permitted” to use the building. Aligning these entrances with nearby transit and retail activity will allow buildings or spaces to become neighborhood gathering points.
- Workshop participants proposed several examples where equity “gets it together,” including:
- Library books that can be borrowed in the waiting room of a health clinic
  - A parking lot of one building that is used for public events hosted by another institution.





# CONCLUSION

Equity might be traditionally perceived as an issue of government policy or community consensus—something realized through programs or policies rather than bricks and mortar. Our workshops in New York revealed otherwise, and explored the ways in which sensitive, inclusive design advances equity. The propositions in this document and the points below can be used to introduce equity as an essential consideration throughout design projects.

- An **equity approach** assesses essential services in terms of communities that have been traditionally under-resourced and populations that can be hard to reach.
- A **needs analysis** convenes members of a community so that they can articulate their own needs and advocate for them. Community-informed design is likely to more accurately reflect genuine needs.
- A community engagement process is not about one aesthetic versus another, but about expression that insightfully speaks to a place and to peoples' **histories and aspirations**.
- An enduring design balances specific requirements with the **flexibility** to adapt to changing needs.
- Design elements that feel **unfinished** or invite participation from users can be helpful in engaging populations that can be hard to reach, like youth or people who are socially isolated.
- Design elements that welcome, are comfortable, and feel safe are not to be dispensed with when budgets are tight. They are essential to serving needy populations. **Services and resources** are more useful and effective when people are not discouraged from taking advantage of them.



# CONTACT

## About the NYC Department of Design and Construction

The Department of Design and Construction is New York City's primary capital construction project manager. In supporting Mayor de Blasio's lenses of growth, sustainability, resiliency, equity, and healthy living, DDC provides communities with new or renovated public buildings such as firehouses, libraries, police precincts, new or upgraded roadways, sewers, water mains in all five boroughs. To manage this \$15 billion portfolio, DDC partners with other City agencies, architects and consultants, whose experience bring efficient, innovative, and environmentally-conscious design and construction strategies to city projects. For more information, please visit [nyc.gov/ddc](http://nyc.gov/ddc).



**Department of  
Design and  
Construction**

## About Van Alen Institute

Van Alen Institute is a nonprofit organization that has been using design to tackle complex social, ecological, and cultural challenges for over 120 years. Building on this more than a century of experience, Van Alen develops cross-disciplinary research, provocative public programs, and inventive design competitions. Van Alen is devoted to creating new spaces for civic dialogue and developing innovative, implementable solutions to society's many challenges, which include the effects of climate change, the consequences of gentrification and vacancy, and the impact of our nation's infrastructure. For more information, please visit [www.vanalen.org](http://www.vanalen.org).

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