

VAN ALEN
REPORT

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HISTORY

Van Alen Institute: Projects in Public Architecture was founded as the Society of Beaux-Arts Architects in 1894. The organization was led for decades by architects who played a decisive role in shaping New York's and the nation's public realm, from the designer of Grand Central Terminal, Whitney Warren, to the architect of Rockefeller Center, Raymond Hood, to the Institute's new namesake, William Van Alen, designer of the Chrysler Building.

The Society adopted different institutional titles to reflect its broad mission, from forming the Beaux-Arts Institute of Design in 1916 to reorganizing as the National Institute for Architectural Education in 1956. Since 1904 it has maintained the prestigious "Paris Prize" design competition, and will continue to do so as the Van Alen Institute.

The Institute reoriented itself to make a more direct response to the crisis for today's cities — the continuing decline of the physical public realm. Reconnecting to New York as the Institute's primary site for investigating the future of architecture and urbanism, the organization chose the name Van Alen Institute: Projects in Public Architecture to represent and identify the new mission and honor the organization's most significant benefactor.

MEMBERSHIP

The benefits of membership include announcements of upcoming design competitions, invitations to seminars, exhibition openings and public events, and reduced cost subscriptions to *Metropolis* and *Architecture on Line*. Members receive *Van Alen Reports* on ongoing projects.

Members of the Institute

- **Associate Member of the Institute, \$25.** Available to students, recent graduates from architecture and related degree programs (May 1991 to present), and those residing more than 100 miles from New York City.
- **Member of the Institute, \$50.**

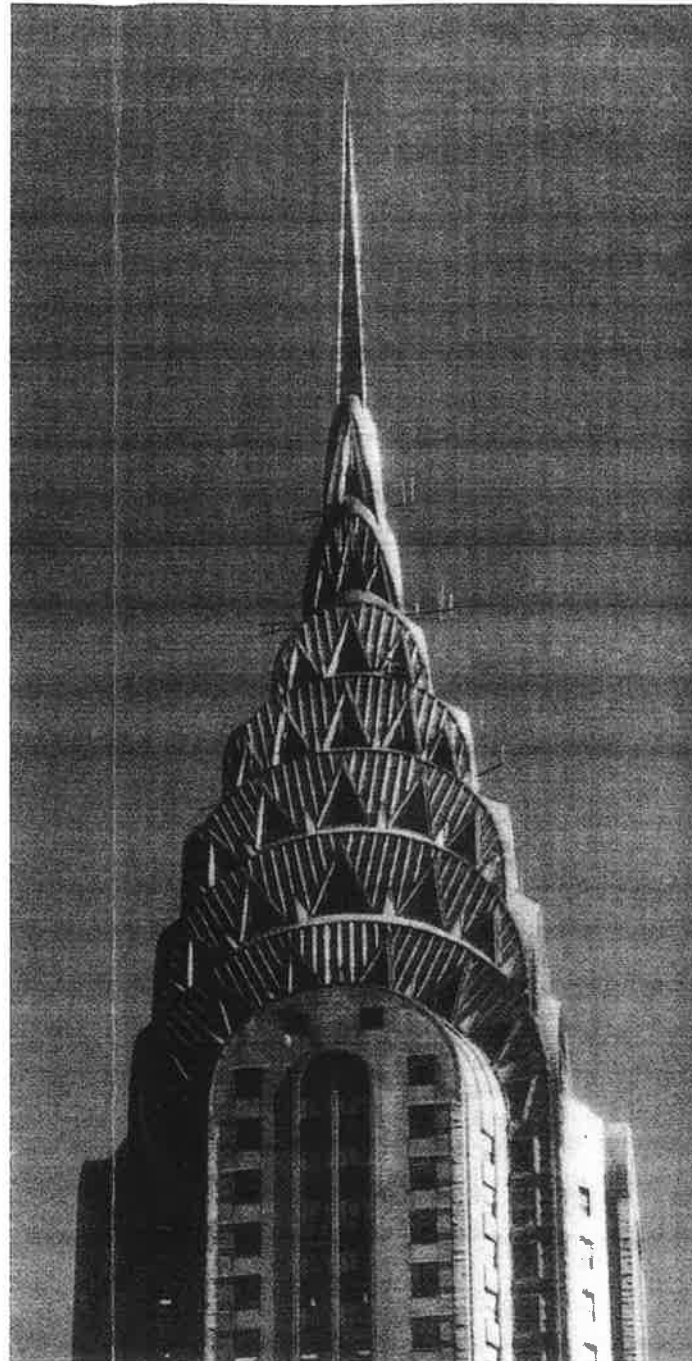
Contributors to the Institute

- **Contributor to the Institute, \$75 and above.**
- **Benefactor of the Institute, \$500 and above.**

Van Alen Institute is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization. Any contribution above \$50 is fully tax-deductible.

Please write, call, fax, or e-mail for information about contributions and memberships.

We welcome your participation in Projects in Public Architecture.



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DEFINITION

This report identifies the issues and programs that constitute the 1996 Projects in Public Architecture for Van Alen Institute. As the first document, it introduces three projects: **Real Downtown/Virtual Downtown**; **Public-Private Property**, and **Health and the City**. For the most part, future *Van Alen Reports* will be organized around one project or program.

These 1996 Projects are the Van Alen Institute's initial response to the ongoing urban crisis that the Institute is structured to address — the continuing decline of the physical public realm. The integrity and importance of the physical public realm, which has been the spatial and symbolic binding and boundary of urban life and work, is profoundly challenged by the “cyber” future, the privatization of public places and public institutions, and a host of other technological and cultural changes. The future of public architecture — the physical public realm from streets and parks to schools and housing — is threatened by both indifference and incapacity.

Van Alen Institute: Projects in Public Architecture is organized to research and communicate the possibility and necessity of designing and implementing a public realm for the next century.

To do this, the Institute focuses on issues where there is a powerful yet underdeveloped relationship between conceptual and concrete change.

The **Real Downtown/Virtual Downtown** project responds to a well-known phenomenon: the current wave of “virtual” information technology has, like the telegraph, automobile, and television before it, put into question the definition of “Downtown” as the inevitable and necessary crossroads of commerce and culture. More specifically, the project addresses how this will affect the world's greatest conceptual-concrete downtown — New York's Financial District. There is a welter of theories of how symbolic analysts, re-engineered workplaces, and 24-hour neighborhoods will serve as the programmatic and physical match for a new cyber order of work and leisure, but is this based on a serious rethinking of the changes in communication and work, and their effect on the public realm?

Public-Private Property and **Health and the City** traverse the same sort of boundaries between the conceptual and the concrete. When President Clinton declares that the era of big government is over, his spoken phrase can engender significant changes in the physical public realm. If big government is over, will new courthouses be fit into flex-space in a strip-mall? If big government is over, does that mean that community boards have more or less to say about the public face of design? Regarding health, when community groups speak for “environmental justice” or when the health industry calls for “therapeutic environments,” the relative abstractions of justice and therapy can result in built consequences.

These projects are designed to integrate *Public Viewing* exhibitions, studio forums, public lectures, design competitions, *Public Design Workshops*, and *Van Alen Reports* into programs that promote inquiry into the processes and production of the public realm, contributing to architecture's evolving role in the public realm's design and implementation.

In realizing these programs, Van Alen Institute is committed to understanding and acknowledging the complex process of making public architecture. Its work is grounded in the grinding gears of public-private, real-virtual, conceptual-concrete processes that define and build New York's public realm, refusing to marginalize architecture as a practice remote from reality, or to marginalize reality as a practice remote from architecture.

PUBLIC SPEAKING

“...machines and now computers guide the way we model the world and grasp reality—and by analogy, the way we form or pattern the city.”

M. Christine Boyer, *CyberCities*, Princeton Architectural Press, 1996.

“The notion of turning these eighth-wonder-of-the-world monoliths [World Trade Center towers] into something as mundane as apartments is very seductive. After all, it's becoming evident that such buildings may soon enough be as quaint as the former warehouses and factories that stylish people now call home.”

Karrie Jacobs, “Cityscape,” *New York Magazine*, 2/26/96.

“New York's great virtue . . . is that it presents a modernity that is not alienated from the population but is in fact, populist.”

O.M.A., Rem Koolhaas and Bruce Mau, *S, M, L, XL*, The Monacelli Press, 1995.

“People with economic and political power have the greatest opportunity to shape public culture by controlling the building of the city's public spaces in stone and concrete. Yet public space is inherently democratic. The question of who can occupy public space, and so define an image of the city, is open-ended.”

Sharon Zukin, *The Cultures of Cities*, Blackwell Publishers, 1995.

“This is not a community park; it's a strip park...it looks like Walt Disney threw up on the wall.”

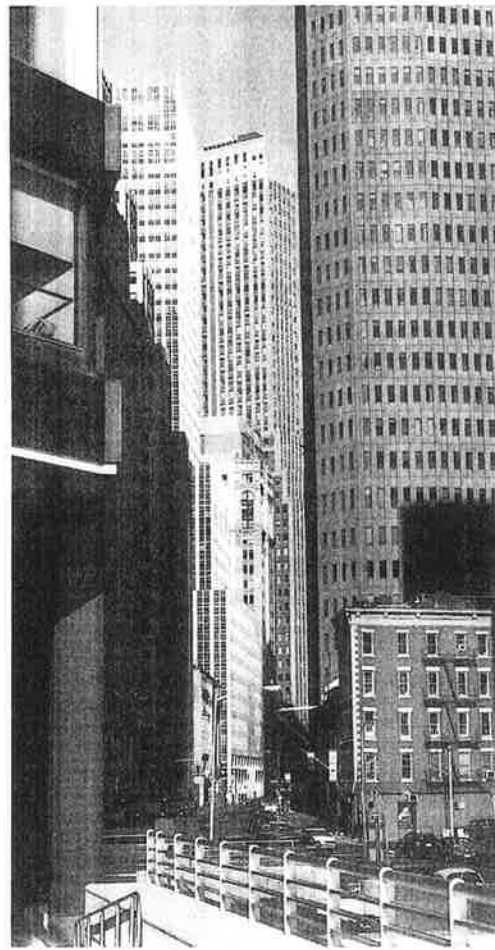
Joseph Conley, Chairman Queens Community Board 2, describing Hunters Point Community Park, *New York Times*, 3/24/96.

The question is not whether living in cities is healthy or not, but “whether the rules that we live by” in cities are healthy or not.

Dr. Ernest Drucker, Professor of Epidemiology and Social Medicine, Montefiore Medical Center, at National Design Museum, 12/1/95.

“The design of the space wasn't the issue for that park. The issue was that there was no garbage collection.”

Peggy Shepard, West Harlem Environmental Action, at City College Architectural Center, 2/7/96.



REAL DOWNTOWN/ VIRTUAL DOWNTOWN

This project begins with several fundamental questions

- Is there a constituency for downtowns, whether for shopping, entertainment, living or work?
- What does downtown, and its public architecture, have to offer that a contemporary suburban campus or shopping center does not provide? And when new "campuses" or shopping districts do emerge in the city, what typifies their "public architecture"?
- Do the emerging "new media" or parallel workforces that depend on "virtual" technologies want or need to locate in places that have the density, mixed uses, and public spaces once typical of downtowns? Is there a correlation between certain types of living and working and certain "downtown" attributes?
- Is "mixed-use" the urban paradigm, or can you design special use or special character districts? Is there or should there be a "Silicon Alley" in New York? Or a diamond district? Does public architecture define itself by singularity, not multiplicity?

Public Viewing in the Flatiron

Architects, landscape architects, community activists and multimedia producers were asked to engage the process and production of the public realm in the Flatiron District through photography and analysis. Their responses ranged from analysis of the semi-public spaces inside 6th Avenue's new superstores to a proposal for a permanent tent structure to define the contemporary public character and use of the northern edge of Union Square.

"The mega-store successfully incorporates programs and spaces normally associated with the street and public space in general within an insular environment defined as much by surveillance cameras...as by its walls...To ignore that these stores do in some very *real* way represent the commodification of the public realm proper and the potential for its devitalization would be naive if not dangerous."

Marc Tsurumaki, *Public Viewing in the Flatiron*, exhibition at Van Alen Institute, 11/95-2/96.

May Forums: The Future of Work and The Future of Downtown

"The changing relative costs of telecommunication and transportation have indeed begun to affect the location of office work. But weakening of the glue that once firmly held office downtowns together turns out to *permit* rather than *determine* dispersal..." William J. Mitchell, *City of Bits*, The MIT Press, 1995.

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The Institute is sponsoring paired panels in May 1996 to address two key questions for New York, Downtown, and downtowns throughout the world: What is the future of work, and does Downtown (and do downtowns) have a future? The speakers are architects, planners, critics, real estate professionals, and sociologists who have responded to the radical shift in the structure of urban living and working.

The Future of Work, May 15

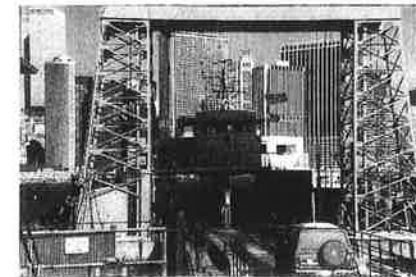
The panel will focus on work normally associated with central business districts, activity now becoming unrecognizable as it takes place in the "paperless" and potentially "peopleless" office. **Janet Abrams**, noted design critic and Writer-at-Large for *I.D. Magazine*, will moderate the panel of practitioners and theorists including: **Jay Chiat**, advertising entrepreneur who led his company's groundbreaking project to develop "virtual" offices in New York and California; **Mitchell Moss**, director of the Taub Urban Research Center at New York University; **Gaetano Pesce**, the accomplished architect whose work ranges from industrial design to urban planning; and **Patricia Sachs**, Technical Director - NYNEX, anthropologist, theorist and designer of work systems.



The Future of Downtown, May 29

The panel will focus how the change in work is transforming New York's Downtown and downtowns throughout the world, and whether the vision of a "24-hour community" can and should be realized in Lower Manhattan. Speakers include: **Karrie Jacobs**, noted critic of the built and "virtual" environment and "Cityscape" columnist for *New York Magazine*; **Rem Koolhaas** (scheduled), Office of Metropolitan Architecture, the internationally renowned architect, urban theorist, and author of *Delirious New York*; **Bruce Menin**, principal in the Crescent Heights company and the developer undertaking the conversion from office to residential of 25 Broad Street; **William Rudin**, developer of the New York Information Technology Center at 55 Broad Street; and **Sharon Zukin**, Professor of Sociology, City University Graduate Center, and author of *The Cultures of Cities*.

The Future of Work, Wednesday, May 15, and the Future of Downtown, Wednesday, May 29, will both be held from **6:30 to 8:30 p.m.** at the **Tribeca Performing Arts Center**, 199 Chambers Street, New York. Please call Van Alen Institute at (212) 924-7000 for further information and reservations.



PUBLIC-PRIVATE PROPERTY

"Like the collapse of the Berlin Wall that made available huge tracts of underutilized lands, the collapse of the maritime industries in New York has accessed perhaps the single most significant urban resource of our time. But New York...has been unable to reintegrate this severed section of the city fabric."

Kevin Bone, *Report from the Jury of the Institute's 1995 Paris Prize*.

Most of the major building projects of the past decades in New York City have been inextricably bound with the issues of where and how the "public" has an impact on the process, execution, and use of major projects, from the arcades of the former AT&T building, to the restoration of Bryant Park, to Battery Park City, to the largely unbuilt plans for the Hudson River waterfront.

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The largest and most prominent sites for "public" architecture are often owned by public agencies. But in an era of retrenched public spending there is inevitably a relationship with the private sector. These projects bring up questions of public-private interdependence, whether in Hunters Point or the Brooklyn Waterfront, the landmarking of an Historic District, or rebuilding the physical public realm through the works of a business improvement district.



1996 Van Alen Fellowship in Public Architecture

In choosing Governors Island for the 1996 Van Alen Fellowship in Public Architecture, the Institute focuses on a site with a dense public character. The island has been owned by the government for 200 years, but has never had public access, with the exception of an annual "open house" held in recent years by the U.S. Coast Guard. In principle, any part or the whole island can now be sold to private developers. Yet any private entity faces a formidable level of public control. First, the entire northern half of the island is already a registered National Historic site, and is moving quickly to being landmarked as an historic district by the city's Landmarks Commission. Second, the waterfront, the most attractive element for a private or public developer, has proved an extraordinarily controversial location at sites around the city for regulatory and community approval. Third, any private future for the Island will have to adhere to the City's zoning ordinance, which now defines the island as appropriate for low density, garden apartment development.

The goal of this competition is articulated in its program:

"How do we understand relations between the private and public realms? The location of Governors Island and the timing of its sale make it seem the perfect site for exclusive enclave development. The 1996 Van Alen Competition looks for design and program strategies that challenge the inevitability of that approach. Competitors are expected to acknowledge the physical reality of cities and their historic programmatic complexity as fundamental to the survival of a vital public realm." Van Alen Institute and Andrea Kahn, *Public Property, 1996 Competition Program*.

For the Institute, this is a first step. We are working to promote the best ideas that come from this competition for both the specific site of Governors Island and similar sites around New York Harbor. To do this, the Institute plans a design workshop. Throughout, this competition has been conceived of as contributing to the overall process of changing Governors Island, in cooperation with the civic, public, and ultimately private entities engaged in the island's reuse.

HEALTH & THE CITY

"Wheezing, 'Riting & 'Rithmetic: 60 waste treatment plants are within a mile of Bronx school; 32% of students are victims of breathing woes"
New York Post headline, 2/13/96

One of the unifying principles of architecture and urbanists in the first half of the century was that if the city made you sick, design could make you well. The designs for physical and mental health ranged from open space to dormitories, from slum clearance to towers in

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the park, from garden cities to garden suburbs, and from eurythmics to the ergonomics of office furniture.

A more recent generation of critics and practitioners discredited many of the motives and much of the built results of the earlier reform movement, and stressed that in many cases culture, not physical form, made the citizens of cities sick or well, and that master planners' totalizing visions of "healthy" environments, whether glazed towers or earth-hugging single family homes, often killed off the urban neighborhoods whose citizens they were meant to heal.

A new directness has returned to the relationship of health and the city, however, renewing debate over public architecture's role. The physical, public realm has reemerged as a health issue across a range of urban conditions: deciding where to site an AIDS hospice; identifying overcrowding as a circumstantial cause of asthma; adopting a revived hospital policy of building gardens for physical and mental therapy; and retrofitting structures to remedy "sick-building" syndrome. "Green" urban design aims to cure the "sick-city" syndrome.

An overarching ecological conception of public architecture is part of the call for "environmental justice" by community groups throughout New York and other cities. These groups' contention is that the messiest part of the city's infrastructure, whether trash incinerators, bus depots, or sewage treatment plants, gets dumped in low-income, often minority neighborhoods, with severe health consequences for community residents.

A turning point for public architecture in this discussion came with the construction of the combination sewage treatment plant-waterfront park at 138th Street and the Hudson River. Originally slated for a site near West 70th Street, adjacent to the Upper West Side, the planned plant was relocated north to Harlem. There were arguments as to whether the plant would pose serious health risks or just smell bad, but the policy decision to build the dual-purpose plant sent a clear message that the potential health problem would be compensated for, whether adequately or not, by a health related amenity — an attractive, safe park for the neighborhood, that happened to be on top of a water treatment plant. Rather than esthetic redress — an art project to shield the plant, as has been done elsewhere — the plant offered programmatic compensation.

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Environmental Justice Seminar

With the Designing New York committee, in summer 1995, the Institute chose to sponsor the "Environmental Justice Seminar" at City College of New York. The seminars' leaders, City College faculty in the School of Architecture and Environmental Studies, are building on the recent past of community groups' responses to the sewage treatment plant and open space issues. The seminar is set up to offer design ideas for how low-income communities can gain control over the development of the neighborhood public realm. The Institute has participated as a moderator on panel presentations and is provisionally scheduling a related exhibition in the late Fall.

Project Direction

Is there a role in which the tools of design as it is generally understood, rather than the tools of policy, are useful or significant for Health and the City? Can the tools of design better identify and articulate the issue? The Institute is developing a program to define a purposeful task for architecture in response to the driving concerns of health in urban conditions.

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