

Oculus

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SMALL FIRMS Doing Big Things

Public Projects, Small Firms, Targeted Tactics

Small Firm Workplace: The Whole Wide World

Small Size, Big Thinking

Breaking Barriers

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Public Projects, Small Firms, Targeted Tactics

Having replaced fee-based bidding with quality-based prequalification, the city's Department of Design + Construction has been matching talented smaller firms with appropriate projects. The result is civic construction with grandeur, greenness, and verve

BY BILL MILLARD

Future senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, as an assistant secretary of labor, had an unglamorous assignment: to write a memo on federal office space. Rare indeed is the memo that becomes a manifesto, yet Moynihan's "Guiding Principles for Federal Architecture" came to guide national design policy, directing civic buildings to "embody the finest contemporary American architectural thought," express the dignity of the national government, reflect regional traditions, avoid an official style, and respect landscape and streetscape contexts. It wasn't until 1994 that the principles were translated into the Design Excellence Program of the General Service Administration (GSA), under Edward Feiner, FAIA, replacing auto-pilot Neoclassicism and penny-pinching Minimalism with high standards for aesthetics and performance.

In July 2004 Mayor Michael Bloomberg announced a Design and Construction Excellence (D+CE) Initiative, piloted by the Department of Design + Construction (DDC) under Commissioner David Burney, FAIA, and incorporated into citywide procurement rules in 2006. DDC's program, says Burney, adds local policies to the goals it shares with GSA's. Along with quality-based prequalification, a predetermined fee schedule, and a review process involving in-house architectural liaisons and professional peers, a "small firm set-aside" program reserves projects below \$15 million for firms with 10 or fewer employees; for projects in the \$15–\$50 million range, eight larger firms are eligible. The initial RFP process in 2008 identified 24 smaller firms; the second, in 2010, selected 20. The next RFP is expected in summer 2012.

Matchmakers and sherpas

As Burney explains, the set-aside responds to the observation that "whatever criteria you use, the big firms always get all the work." Allocating sub-\$15 million projects to small practices promotes project quality, he notes. "For a \$5-million library renovation, do you want AECOM?" he asks. "Probably not. You're going to get better service from the smaller firm," particularly more hands-on involvement by principals. DDC pairs projects with practices – paying attention to scale – and guides relations among the firm, the city agency serving as client, and community boards or other local stakeholders.

The D+CE program has been "good about bringing some lesser-known smaller firms into the system – not just the usual suspects," says participant Belmont Freeman, FAIA. The program can be a ticket to wider recognition for a small or young firm with a strong vision but few realized designs. The emphasis is on a promising portfolio, a familiarity with sustainable-design strategies (mandated by Local Law 86), and an ability to meet schedule and budget demands. "I can't think of one small firm where we've said, 'They were terrible; we're not going to use them again,'" Burney says. "To us, it's a matchmaking process. There are certain projects suited to certain firms, and we're trying to make that marriage."

"Part of our responsibility is to beat the bureaucratic path ahead of these design firms and keep the process moving," Burney notes. Guidance through complex municipal procedures is a boon to small firms for whom the paperwork and meetings can be daunting. "We had not realized we have to do so many presentations," says Anna Torriani, AIA, a principal of Atelier Pagnamenta Torriani. Their branch library on Staten Island (see below) required meetings with the New York Public Library (NYPL) board, the Art Commission (now the Design Commission), and the community board. DDC's encouragement of innovative design was instrumental in the project's success. Residents had been asking for a library since 1937, but the abstract design solved certain problems in nontraditional ways, and the prolonged silence after the community presentation was nerve-wracking. Finally, Torriani recalls, "somebody got up and said, 'Hallelujah!' That was the end, and everybody was relieved."

Architects who have navigated city government's complexities praise DDC even while lambasting other officials. Belmont Freeman Architects has D+CE contracts with both DDC and the Parks Department. "I think it's a great system," Freeman says of DDC's program, "because you knock yourself out on the big RFP prequalification, and once you're approved as one of the 20 firms, the RFPs that ensue are streamlined. It saves a lot of time for everybody." On the other hand, construction delays on Freeman's 59th Street Recreation Center for Parks' program reveal trouble spots in municipal processes. The original scope of work and budget "had no connection in reality," Freeman says, and "the mechanism for increasing fees to consultants to design



Atelier Pagnamenta Torriani: The Mariners Harbor Branch Library on Staten Island sports a glass-roofed spine that "cracks" the building open like an oyster shell.



larger and more complex projects has lagged." Change orders have been approved by Parks but blocked by other officials. "You know our comptroller is in political trouble and is trying to look like Mr. Tough Guy, protector of the civic finances, by rejecting everything." Still, Freeman unhesitatingly says he'd enter the program again.

Flames at the end of the Wicks

"This project demonstrates the shortcomings of the Wicks Law," Freeman continues. Instituted in 1912 and expanded in 1946 under a bill sponsored by State Sen. Arthur Wicks, this state law mandates separate electrical, plumbing, and HVAC contracts on public projects over certain cost thresholds. Its corruption-fighting purpose was admirable on paper, but its implementation overcomplicates projects. Instead of saving by keeping a general contractor from putting an overhead profit on subs' work, Burney notes, it has inflated costs through delays, infighting, and poor coordination. "If you're doing a small library and your electrician goes belly-up," he observes, "the whole project grinds to a halt."

"When you have a very complicated project," Freeman says, "cracks between these contracts open up. There were constant delays in determining who was supposed to do what. The general contractor didn't have overall responsibility; it was an extraordinarily cumbersome way to implement a project. Change orders had to be written to cover work that wasn't covered in any of the three contracts, and could take months to approve."

Fortunately, two new project labor agreements valid until 2014 have replaced Wicks with a set of uniform union rules, work rates, overtime systems, and related procedures. DDC now awards contracts directly to a general contractor, whom

Project Credits

PROJECT: Mariners Harbor Branch Library
CLIENT: New York Public Library; NYC Department of Design + Construction
ARCHITECT: Atelier Pagnamenta Torriani
PROJECT TEAM: Lorenzo Pagnamenta, AIA, Anna Torriani, AIA, Wasmiya Tan, Raffaele Stefani, Damien Romanens, Nam Suk Oh, Juan Carlos Salas Ballester, Caterina Inderbitzin, Petya Ivanova, Felix Lederberger
STRUCTURAL ENGINEER: Weidinger and Associates
CIVIL ENGINEER: Michael Wein, PE
LANDSCAPE: SCAPE
MEP & LEED: Plus Group
LIGHTING DESIGN: Fernando Soler
CODE: Berzak-Schoen
COST: Faithful + Gould
SPECIFICATIONS: Construction Specifications
CONTRACTORS: Plaza Construction Corporation; Ace Contracting; EF Pro Contracting; Adco Electric Corp.

"To us, it's a match-making process. There are certain projects suited to certain firms, and we're trying to make that marriage."

— David Burney, FAIA, Commissioner, Department of Design + Construction

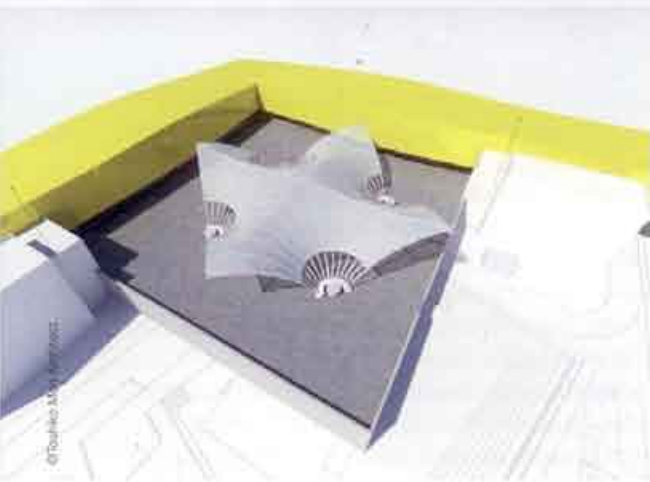
it holds responsible for hiring subs who can work harmoniously and stay on budget. "We're out of the Wicks Law business," says Burney. "Hooray!"

Atelier Pagnamenta Torriani: Mariners Harbor Branch Library

A working-class neighborhood in northwest Staten Island will soon have a library that combines historical awareness with creative use of light and materials. Noting that the area once had what Lorenzo Pagnamenta, AIA, calls "a strong undercurrent of oystering and maritime life," he and Torriani used an oyster shell as a contextual metaphor for the single-story building. Patrons and staff enjoy natural light from clerestories and a glass-roofed spine that "cracks" the building open like an oyster shell. Low-E glazing with internal louvers minimizes southern glare while admitting northern light. As classic Carnegie libraries used monumental staircases to imply an ascent toward knowledge, Pagnamenta notes, Mariners Harbor Branch presents its open roof as "a point of enlightenment."

Shade provided by several mature trees protects an outdoor reading garden and terrace. The architects acknowledge the library's multiple functions as a community center and job-search headquarters for recent immigrants by providing generous spaces for all ages, public computers, and an ample reading room. Scheduled to open late in 2012, Mariners Harbor is recognized as a D+CE flagship project and won a 2008 Design Excellence Award from the city's Design Commission.

Pagnamenta and Torriani found that working with the NYPL as client and DDC as manager was surprisingly smooth sailing, though the project was still subject to Wicks. "We were lucky the



separate contractors worked agreeably together on the site," says Pagnamenta. "What we liked," Torriani adds, "is that the client really, truly believed in design."

Toshiko Mori Architect: Brooklyn Children's Museum Rooftop Canopy

Another highly regarded project might not have happened at all if Toshiko Mori, FAIA, were easily swayed by rumor. During earlier administrations, she had heard "scary stories": contractual paperwork, bureaucracy, an unconscionably slow payment schedule, an impossible review process. "It's a project that firms our size would never be able to afford to entertain," she says.

Mori describes her experience with Burney's team and operations, however, as a "wonderful surprise. If this was the way the city operated all the time, then I was totally misinformed, but I have a suspicion that things have drastically changed." Her firm's addition to the Brooklyn Children's Museum had to respect an impressive design pedigree: a 1977 building by Hardy Holzman Pfeiffer expanded by Rafael Viñoly Architects in 2008. She added a three-season rooftop canopy to accommodate events, performances, educational

Toshiko Mori Architect:
The translucent canopy atop the Brooklyn Children's Museum will host events, performances, and educational programs.

Project Credits

PROJECT: Brooklyn Children's Museum Rooftop Canopy
CLIENT: Brooklyn Children's Museum; Department of Cultural Affairs (funding agency); Department of Design + Construction (managing agency)
ARCHITECT:

Toshiko Mori Architect
PROJECT TEAM: Toshiko Mori, FAIA, Joshua Uhl, AIA, LEED AP, David Jaubert, Mathieu Lemieux-Blanchard
STRUCTURAL/MEP/FIRE PROTECTION/ACOUSTICAL ENGINEER: Arup

Slade Architecture:
The carousel at the Staten Island Zoo is being relocated from the periphery to a more central location near the dining facilities, and being refitted with glass doors and an ETFE roof to lower sound nuisances to neighbors.

programs, and casual outdoor dining from the existing café. The canopy had to be very lightweight to respect the building's structural capacity. Working with Arup, she chose a heat-resistant ethylene tetrafluoroethylene (ETFE) skin on arched-steel tubular forms, radiating from four support points as symmetrical fan shapes conjoined above, creating curves that harmonize with Viñoly's boomerang design. The canopy earned her firm a 2010 Public Design Commission award.

Slade Architecture: Staten Island Zoo

James Slade, AIA, LEED AP, and Hayes Slade, AIA, cite their work at the Staten Island Zoo (out to bid at this writing, with no opening date fixed) as the kind of contract that would rarely be available to a small firm. The client is the Department of Cultural Affairs (DCA), but the site is on Parks Department land. Budget cuts and political negotiations trimmed a more ambitious master plan, including a new entrance building and a farmstead educating urban children about rural ecosystems, to two new components: a leopard exhibition and a carousel enclosure. Working on this eight-acre zoo, renowned for niches like its reptile collection (and a charismatic groundhog that once bit Mayor Bloomberg), gave the Slades some education about a different ecosystem: city-government processes.

"Each agency involved," says James Slade, is "trying to do what's best for the city as a whole, but coming at it from different views." Parks emphasizes tree preservation and grounds maintenance; zoo officials are concerned with visitors' experience, animals' well-being, and relations with adjoining residents; DCA strives to spread resources evenly among multiple competing constituencies. DDC acts as orchestrator and assists with documentation.



Project Credits

PROJECT: Staten Island Zoo
CLIENT: Staten Island Zoo
ARCHITECT: Slade Architecture
PROJECT TEAM: Hayes Slade, AIA, James Slade, AIA, LEED AP, Emily Andersen, RA, Georg Brennecke, J.P. Casillas, LEED AP, Tian Gao, Kristina Kesler, RA, LEED AP, Eliza Koshland, Chia-Ping Lin, Jeff Wandersman, RA, LEED AP
EXHIBITION/LANDSCAPE DESIGN (LEOPARD EXHIBIT): The Porico Group
MEP ENGINEER (CAROUSEL): Pavane & Kwatbrun
CIVIL ENGINEER/ELECTRICAL/PLUMBING ENGINEER (LEOPARD EXHIBIT): Stantec
STRUCTURAL ENGINEER: Gibson Murray Stefcek
LIGHTING DESIGN: Tiliotson Design Associates
GRAPHIC DESIGN: Bill Smith Group
PROJECT MANAGEMENT AGENCY: NYC Department of Design + Construction

"I think the model is European cities, where nearly all public buildings are competition-based. That gives opportunities to many young and unknown firms, and promotes the design culture. The excellence and importance of architecture are more in the public eye."

— Toshiko Mori, FAIA

The Slades strove to maintain a band of trees surrounding the zoo, but a leopard enclosure normally needs below-grade walls to keep the cats from digging out. Foundation excavation, Hayes notes, is often "basically a slow way to kill trees." To preserve the roots, they chose a horizontal, subterranean mesh digging barrier instead of the customary leopard-proof concrete. A foundation system using football-shaped diamond piers and steel poles driven in a cone formation saves materials and is less invasive to the landscape. Placing the carousel centrally near the dining facilities and giving its enclosure glass doors and an ETFE roof lowers sound nuisances to neighbors and creates a bright, open area where adults can dine while watching their children ride.

DDC has been instrumental, Hayes notes, in getting these design solutions approved. Along with guidance on time-consuming documentation, the Slades add, working with the agency generates internal benefits for a small firm that extend beyond the immediate project and offset the tight fee structure. Submitting drawings to DDC strengthens a firm's ability to produce deliverables required by complicated organizations. Future clients view the city's vetting as a sign of a firm's credibility, and DDC's online Design Consultant Guide is, in Hayes's words, "the closest thing you'll ever see to a manual on how to do the optimal project."

A permanent culture of progress

DDC is not resting on its laurels. The second term in the phrase "Design and Construction Excellence" is Burney's next frontier. "We fall off when we get out to construction, because we're still

bound by low bid," he says. To connect design teams and construction managers earlier, he favors quality-based selection in construction as well as design. Considering the sophistication of today's buildings, trades, and technology, particularly BIM systems, "if you're not working together as a team during the construction process, you're really in trouble." Processes that deliver BIM models to subs, he notes, raise questions of joint responsibility for information integrity, and "we're probably five to ten years away from getting full penetration through the trades in terms of full BIM capabilities."

Mori views DDC's program in a global context. "I think the model is European cities, where nearly all public buildings are competition-based," she says. "That gives opportunities to many young and unknown firms, and promotes the design culture. The excellence and importance of architecture are more in the public eye." She favors adapting the selection process so it includes open presentation and dialogue, perhaps even public participation as in Switzerland, as well as portfolio reviews.

On the inevitable question of what to do after this mayoralty ends, Mori has one simple recommendation: "Retain all the current commissioners!" The leadership that has made D+CE into a civic norm, she believes, is "a huge asset that any new mayor would inherit...something the city can be proud of globally." ■

Bill Millard is a freelance writer and editor whose work has appeared in *Oculus*, *Architect*, *Icon*, *Content*, *The Architect's Newspaper*, *LEAF Review*, and other publications.

