

The Architect's Newspaper

Wyckoff Cultural Education Center

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Designer: nArchitects
Client: Department of Parks & Recreation
Location: Brooklyn, NY
Completion: Late 2014

nArchitects design for a cultural education center soon to be built at the Wyckoff House Museum sets forth a modern counterpart to this historic Brooklyn structure—the oldest still standing in New York City. The new building subtly draws upon the museum's

Dutch colonial style, reinterpreting the architectural details of the 1652 saltbox house in a contemporary framework that will serve as a flexible space for community and educational programming and events. The 5,000-square-foot center accommodates a public space, gallery, gift shop, caretaker's apartment, and administrative offices, all of which flow out into one portal overlooking the original house.

"We were looking at the clustering of the farm buildings relative to how the outdoor spaces were activated and used back in the day," said nArchitects partner Eric Bunge. The firm also took cues from the landscape paintings of the Dutch masters. Bunge and his colleagues noted the quality of light filtering in from windows in these pictures, as well as the use of indoor and outdoors spaces and the views framed by portals.

Museum and Landmarks Preservation officials told the firm that they wanted the center to look contemporary and avoid replicating a bygone era of architecture. With that in mind, nArchitects sought to pay homage to the original house by choosing materials and features that reference the Dutch colonial style. They selected zinc cladding to play off the dark wood of the house and planned a succession of spaces with windows close to the ceiling, in keeping with much 17th century Dutch architecture.

The museum, once surrounded by farmland, now sits on an isolated plot surrounded by car and tire shops in a busy section of the Flatlands section of Brooklyn. Bunge said he oriented the center to "create a buffer on a very dense site" and to "frame the view of the house and block out the noise and visual clutter." Landscape design by Nancy Owens Studio further shields the grounds from the urban sprawl and creates a link between the center and house. Visitors enter through "a screen of trees into the portal" and then walk down a path to the house. Harking back to colonial times, the landscape architects have chosen native plantings and vegetation originally imported to Brooklyn by Dutch farmers, such as Sedges, Blue Flag Iris, and Dogwoods.

"Many of our institutions and social structures are indebted to the Dutch experience, and especially New York's legacy as a liberal place," said Bunge. "This project and the landscape and the house tell a much broader story—it is larger than Brooklyn, it is a foundational story about America."