

BETWEEN HOUSES

**GRAIN COLLECTIVE AND NANCY OWENS STUDIO
REIMAGINE THE LANDSCAPES OF NEW YORK CITY'S
PUBLIC HOUSING SYSTEM.**

BY ZACH MORTICE

NANCY OWENS STUDIO

PULLING OFF THE ROAD DURING A HOT AND STICKY NEW YORK CITY SUMMER DAY IN 2020, AND INTO THE BERRY PUBLIC HOUSING COMPLEX ON STATEN ISLAND, KATE BELSKI OF GRAIN COLLECTIVE HAD A BIT OF A REVELATION.

She found herself in a central lawn dotted with trees, surrounded by eight sawtooth-shaped, low-rise buildings that are home to nearly 1,000 people, and it was all positively bucolic. "All of a sudden we feel like we're immersed in this beautiful oak forest," she says. "There [are] wild turkeys running across the central lawn. [It's] actually preserved forest in the middle of the city, and it's kind of amazing." These environments, Belski says, are "providing [a] refuge from the urban environment and adding so much [in terms of] urban heat island effect, biodiversity, absorbing water." The Berry campus is 86 percent open space. "I just think that the idea of these sites as a concrete jungle is so far from what they actually are," she says.

Belski was there to document the landscape for the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) as part of an ambitious master planning initiative undertaken by the agency. And there was plenty to pick apart, much of which she'd seen before. Past the surprise of a pastoral remove in New York City was a landscape that was repetitive, overpopulated with underused playgrounds, and suffering from a distinct lack of programming diversity.

To counter this, Grain Collective's preliminary sketches of Berry call for an axial entry procession leading to the central lawn, through a farmers' market and event space, gateway plaza, and outdoor stage, flanked by urban farming areas, adventure fitness programs, and children's playgrounds. At the perimeter, destination multigenerational playgrounds would attract people from across the neighborhood.

BERRY PUBLIC HOUSING COMPLEX (STATEN ISLAND)



Released in October 2021, NYCHA's *Open Space Masterplan* is the work of two landscape architecture firms: Grain Collective and Nancy Owens Studio. Together the firms surveyed 133 NYCHA campuses and plotted broad landscape reorganizations for each. NYCHA translated this plan into a succinct YouTube video that explains the effort to public housing residents; the video earned a 2022 ASLA Professional Honor Award in Communications. The master plan is a fundraising tool, giving charitable private-sector actors and nonprofits a budget road map to re-envisioning 2,400 acres of NYCHA properties, where 1 in 16 New Yorkers (more than 500,000) live, nearly 90 percent of them Black or Hispanic.

Private sector intervention is necessary because, as Delma Palma, NYCHA's deputy director of design services, says, "We're working every day to keep the buildings standing." Driven by shrinking federal support for NYCHA—down 18 percent from 2001 to 2017—the agency currently has a \$40 billion maintenance backlog, and a 2017 physical needs assessment uncovered capital needs of \$870 million for NYCHA grounds alone.

The survey data collected by Grain Collective (available in an ArcGIS map online) is key to advocating for what NYCHA needs. "Having that data is not something that's typical of public housing or of these lower-income communities," Palma says.



COURTESY GRAIN COLLECTIVE



COURTESY GRAIN COLLECTIVE

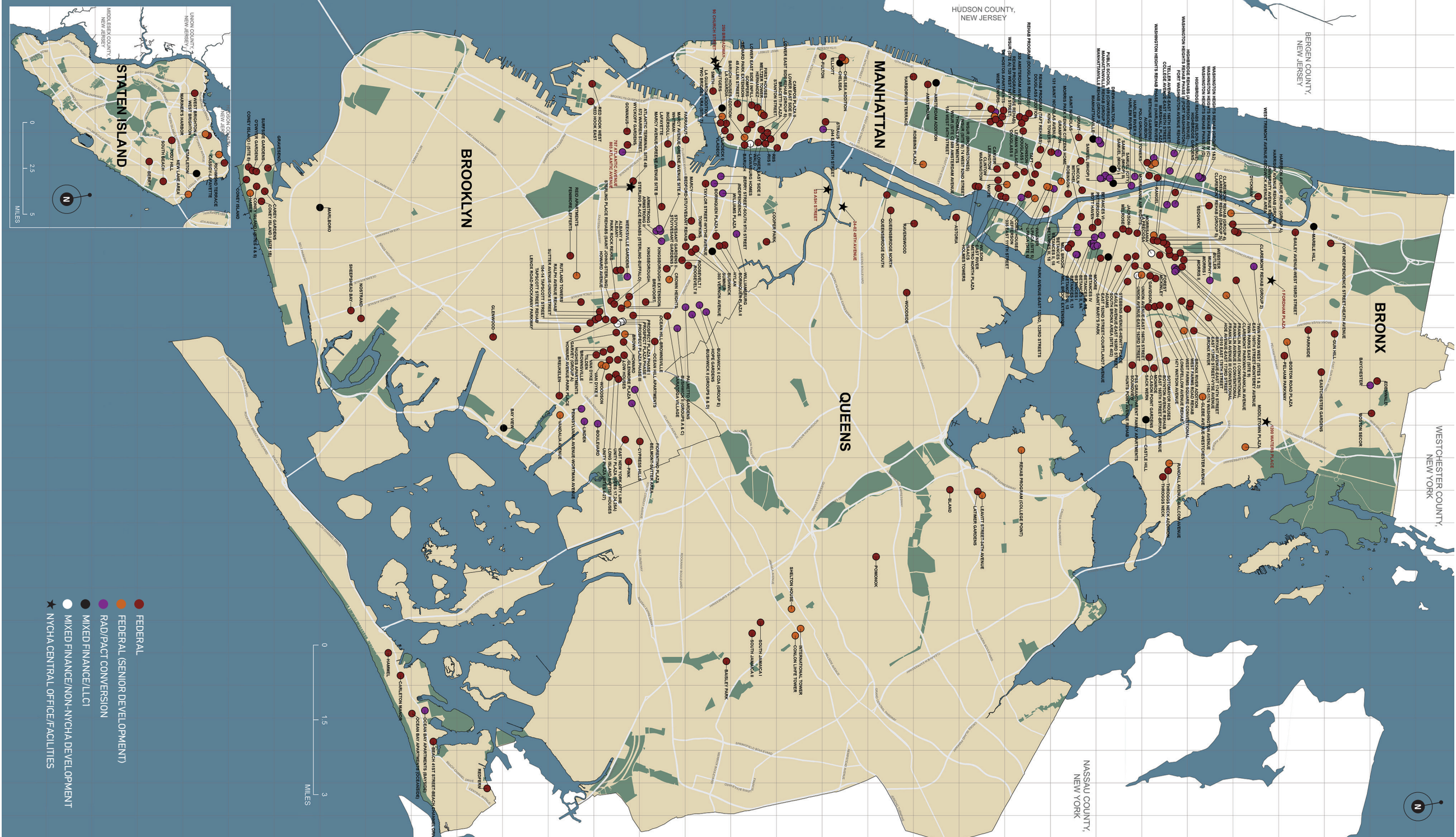
RIGHT AND BELOW
The Berry public housing complex on Staten Island is centered on a wide lawn dotted with trees and playgrounds.



And it's a massive trove. Each NYCHA campus has its buildings and landscapes diagrammed and modeled, with demographics, urban context, maintenance deficiencies, and more. Nancy Owens Studio conducted safety and maintenance evaluations for hundreds of playgrounds, and just one had 18 separate data points.

This kind of emphasis on landscape design from NYCHA is new, and this is the first time the agency has engaged in indefinite-delivery/indefinite-quantity contracts specifically with landscape architecture firms, which were previously contracted as subconsultants under architecture and engineering firms. "We recognize the huge

NEW YORK CITY HOUSING AUTHORITY HOUSING DEVELOPMENT LOCATION MAP



impact that landscape has,” Palma says. “With a small amount of capital, you can make a huge impact in these places.”

One reason for this outsized impact is that mature landscapes already exist. Stereotypes of American urban public housing imagine it as looming towers of compacted and suffering humanity, but the reality is often different. In New York City, sites can be 75 percent or more open space, a visible nod to Le Corbusier’s tower-in-the-park design ideology that held sway in the early to mid-20th century when many of these campuses were built. Additionally, NYCHA has the second-largest private tree canopy in New York City, according to Palma, topped only by the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation.

On the ground, across all five boroughs, what the two firms found were monotonous landscapes with a lack of visual and spatial hierarchy, lending the campuses a disorganized yet empty feel. The basic building blocks of the majority of NYCHA landscapes are tot lots (some large campuses have eight that are nearly identical), basketball courts, and bits of lawn and trees punitively fenced off at every juncture. There are few visual mark-

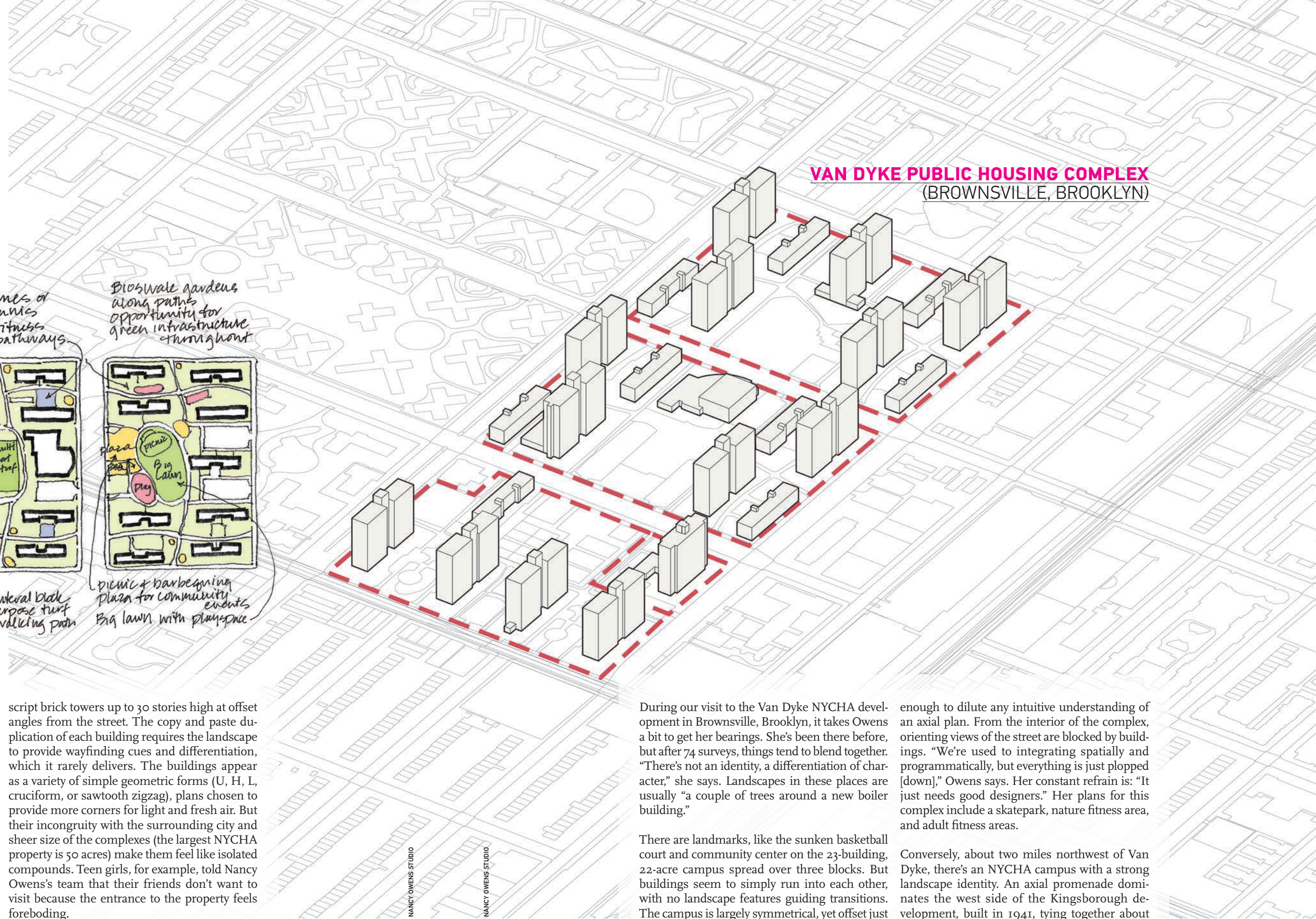
ers to guide circulation through space, and few landscape signals that differentiate spaces for individuals, families, small groups, and large gatherings. The results are thousands of acres that seem impenetrable and placeless.

Most outdoor activity equipment is playgrounds for younger kids, but 73 percent of NYCHA residents are over 18. This mismatch is the product of

demographic change: Much of NYCHA’s housing was built after World War II for young families with small children that have since aged out of the system. According to Grain Collective, some 40 percent of its playgrounds go unused, and only 2 percent of space is for passive uses by adults.

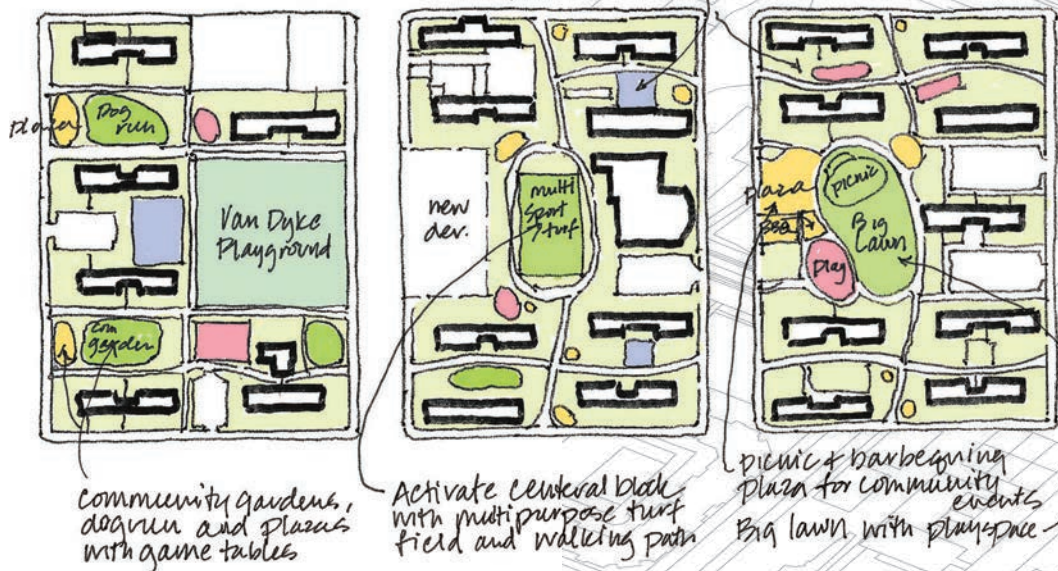
NYCHA developments accumulated their many fencing barriers in response to the record-high

crime rates of the 1980s and 1990s, Palma says. They were a way to control how people moved through space. The fencing also became a way to keep people off landscapes to lessen maintenance expenses. But today this makes many of the landscapes little more than intrusively managed circulation routes, inaccessible and nearly unusable, with nearly 90 percent of mature trees behind fencing. These barriers confront residents



VAN DYKE PUBLIC HOUSING COMPLEX
(BROWNSVILLE, BROOKLYN)

VAN DYKE I & II



ABOVE
Nancy Owens Studio's plans for the Van Dyke public housing complex add a wider variety of programmatic diversity to what is currently an undifferentiated landscape.

and visitors with a profound pessimism about the public's ability to manage public space. "In the past, NYCHA took out a lot of amenities—seating and benches—because they didn't want people hanging out," says Nancy Owens, ASLA, the founder of her eponymous studio. It appears that those forces at NYCHA got their wish. On a cool June morning when I visited several Brooklyn campuses, there was virtually no one spending time outside.

In addition to discouraging integration and connection to the wider city, many of NYCHA's campuses, especially the largest ones, interrupt the city street grid, placing repetitive and nonde-

script brick towers up to 30 stories high at offset angles from the street. The copy and paste duplication of each building requires the landscape to provide wayfinding cues and differentiation, which it rarely delivers. The buildings appear as a variety of simple geometric forms (U, H, L, cruciform, or sawtooth zigzag), plans chosen to provide more corners for light and fresh air. But their incongruity with the surrounding city and sheer size of the complexes (the largest NYCHA property is 50 acres) make them feel like isolated compounds. Teen girls, for example, told Nancy Owens's team that their friends don't want to visit because the entrance to the property feels foreboding.

During our visit to the Van Dyke NYCHA development in Brownsville, Brooklyn, it takes Owens a bit to get her bearings. She's been there before, but after 74 surveys, things tend to blend together. "There's not an identity, a differentiation of character," she says. Landscapes in these places are usually "a couple of trees around a new boiler building."

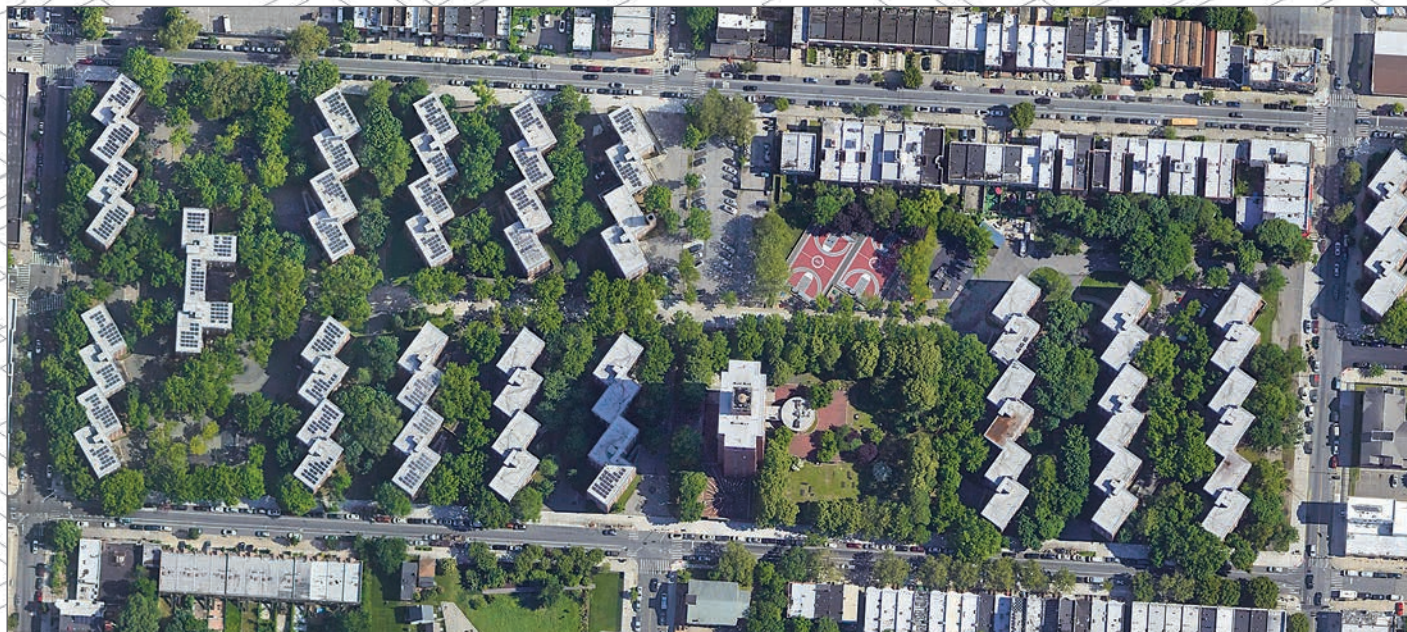
There are landmarks, like the sunken basketball court and community center on the 23-building, 22-acre campus spread over three blocks. But buildings seem to simply run into each other, with no landscape features guiding transitions. The campus is largely symmetrical, yet offset just

enough to dilute any intuitive understanding of an axial plan. From the interior of the complex, orienting views of the street are blocked by buildings. "We're used to integrating spatially and programmatically, but everything is just plopped [down]," Owens says. Her constant refrain is: "It just needs good designers." Her plans for this complex include a skatepark, nature fitness area, and adult fitness areas.

Conversely, about two miles northwest of Van Dyke, there's an NYCHA campus with a strong landscape identity. An axial promenade dominates the west side of the Kingsborough development, built in 1941, tying together about

**KINGSBOROUGH PUBLIC HOUSING COMPLEX
(BROOKLYN)**

**THE NYCHA
DEVELOPMENTS
ARE LIKE
A MUSEUM
OF TREES.**



ABOVE
The Kingsborough public housing development features a strong axial plan that Nancy Owens Studio used to guide its concept design.

half of its 16 six-story apartment buildings. The promenade is lined by a loose allée and terminates at a spectacular Works Progress Administration-era sculptural frieze by Richmond Barthé titled *Exodus and Dance*. But the opposite side of the frieze is a forlorn asphalt courtyard cradled by a U-shaped building. Owens's plans suggest converting the promenade terminus to an oval round that fronts the Barthé frieze with a performance area.

The open space master plan project began in March 2020, just as COVID-19 locked the city down, which limited public input. But the firms did speak with property managers and tenant association presidents. For Grain Collective, the sudden worldwide focus on public health made a connection to another way these landscapes were letting NYCHA residents down. Early in the pandemic, areas of central Brooklyn and the South Bronx with high numbers of NYCHA



NANCY OWENS STUDIO, BACKGROUND IMAGE: GOOGLE EARTH, INSET PHOTO

NANCY OWENS STUDIO

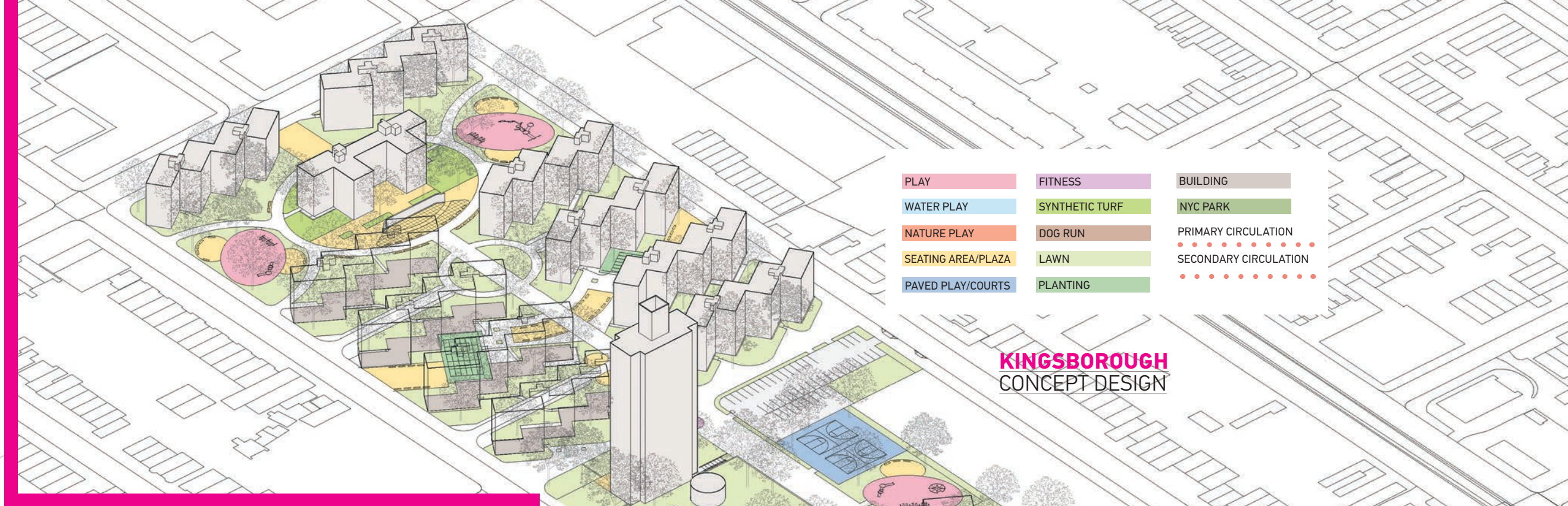
properties had some of the highest rates of COVID-19 infection, on top of already high levels of asthma, obesity, and type 2 diabetes often seen in low-income communities. In July 2020 alone, 5 percent of people in these areas tested positive for COVID-19. This told the Grain Collective founding principal Runit Chhaya, ASLA, that residents “did not have good open spaces to go out to, and they were stuck in their apartments,” he says. “In a morbid way [the pandemic] fueled the momentum for this project.”

Climate resilience is a vital part of the plan too, and includes recommendations to reduce impervious surfaces, expand biodiversity with plantings,

and install green infrastructure that can reduce heat island effects and absorb stormwater. For Belski, a key question is, “How can we integrate the amenity needs of the demographics that are living there without taking away from this amazing natural respite that has evolved because historically we didn’t trust people to access their own landscapes?” Given the vitrine-like role fences and barriers have played in fostering the growth of the mature flora on campuses, NYCHA developments are a “museum of trees,” she says.

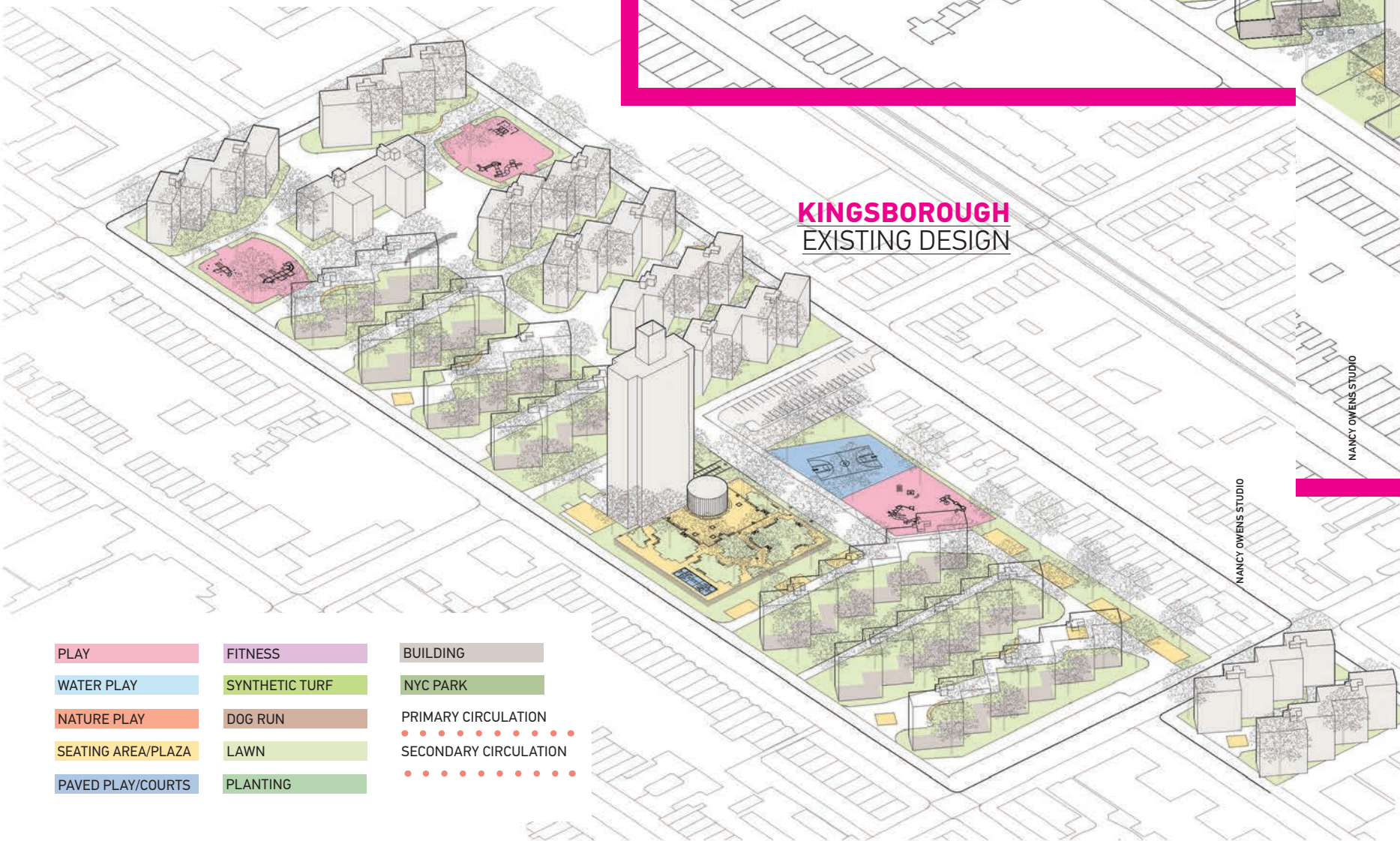
The firms’ research revealed that teen girls and seniors often feel left out of NYCHA landscapes, leaving them bored and isolated, respectively.

BELOW AND OPPOSITE
Like many NYCHA complexes, the Kingsborough public housing complex orients its buildings away from the street and interrupts the street grid.



PLAY	FITNESS	BUILDING
WATER PLAY	SYNTHETIC TURF	NYC PARK
NATURE PLAY	DOG RUN	PRIMARY CIRCULATION
SEATING AREA/PLAZA	LAWN	SECONDARY CIRCULATION
PAVED PLAY/COURTS	PLANTING	

KINGSBOROUGH
CONCEPT DESIGN

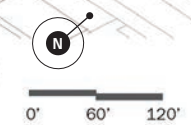


KINGSBOROUGH
EXISTING DESIGN

PLAY	FITNESS	BUILDING
WATER PLAY	SYNTHETIC TURF	NYC PARK
NATURE PLAY	DOG RUN	PRIMARY CIRCULATION
SEATING AREA/PLAZA	LAWN	SECONDARY CIRCULATION
PAVED PLAY/COURTS	PLANTING	

NANCY OWENS STUDIO

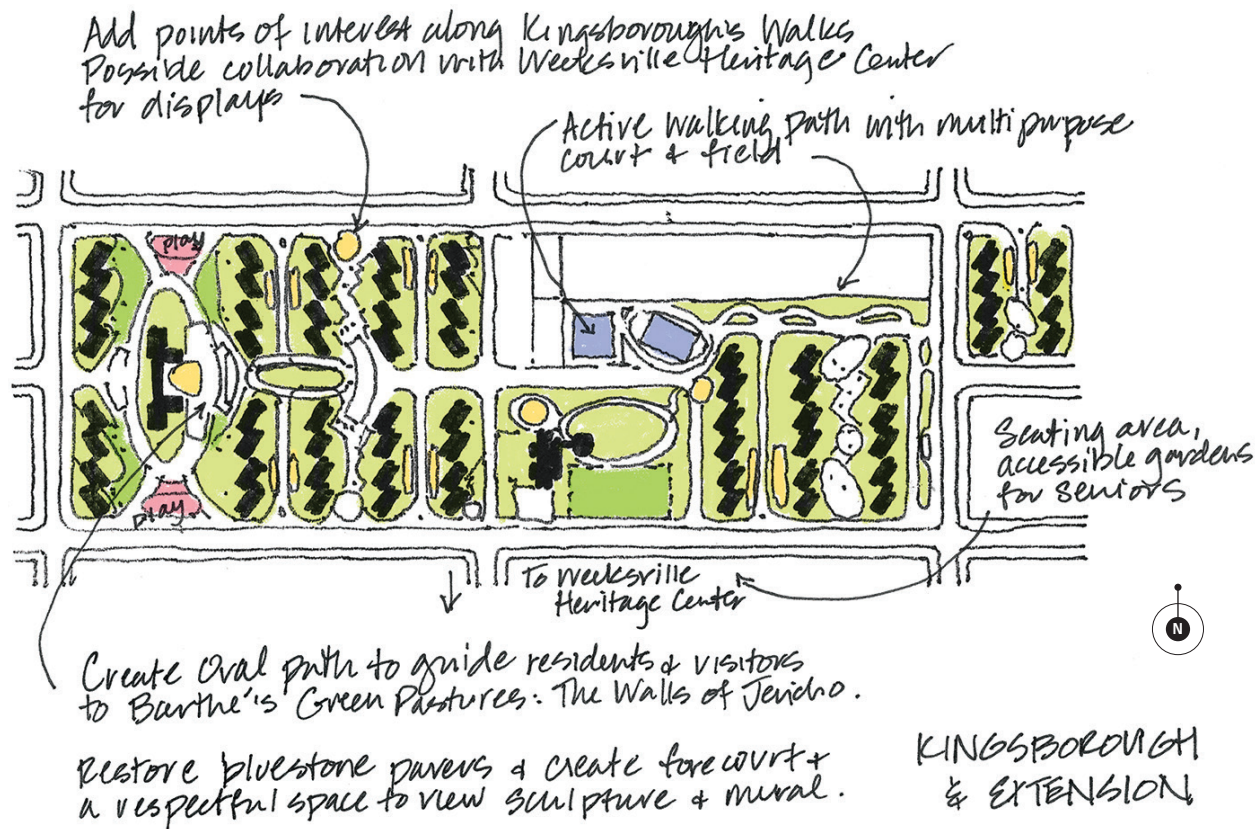
NANCY OWENS STUDIO



“We spent so much time walking around [asking], ‘Where are the teen girls? What are they gonna do?’” Belski says. If they’re too old for playgrounds, parents of younger kids might look askance if they hang around. But “being a teen is all about seeing and being seen,” she says. The master plan proposes “providing these gathering spaces for them that are highly visible, so that they have the protection of the eyes of the community; they’re well-lit, but they feel like a space created for them.” Examples are terraced stair seating and stages. Seniors need seating areas integrated with other programs and activities.

The most challenging sites for Owens are often the smallest ones, such as Stuyvesant Gardens in nearby Bedford-Stuyvesant. It’s a low-rise, scattered site NYCHA complex on two separate long and narrow blocks, occupying some six acres of land. The landscape here is a narrow strip, mostly populated by six repetitive playgrounds on top of fraying rubber tiles. Across this strip, from one building to the next, five layers of fencing box out trees, patches of grass, and the playgrounds, delineating every transition in the landscape. It doesn’t seem surprising that none of the playgrounds are being used.

KINGSBOROUGH PUBLIC HOUSING COMPLEX
(BROOKLYN)



ABOVE
Nancy Owens Studio's concept designs for the Kingsborough complex include connecting it to neighborhood cultural amenities.

By chance, we meet a local activist and community organizer, Bruce Green, who came to Stuyvesant Gardens that day to organize an antiviolence rally after a child was shot there a few days before. As police mill around in the background, he says, "I thought you might have been grief counselors." It's a reminder that the landscape design security measures (such as broader sight lines and improved lighting) Owens is thinking through have ramifications beyond creating more inviting street frontages, though they are unable to alter the trajectory of epidemic gun violence on their own.

Green, who often partners with the New York City Parks Department in his activism, grew up

in NYCHA housing just a few blocks away, at the Eleanor Roosevelt NYCHA campus. And true to Owens's evaluations, he says those landscapes prized durability over fun. But he remembers early on there was enough room for a baseball game in front of this building—until more fencing came in. "At that point, you would pretty much have to take your game to a local park," he says.

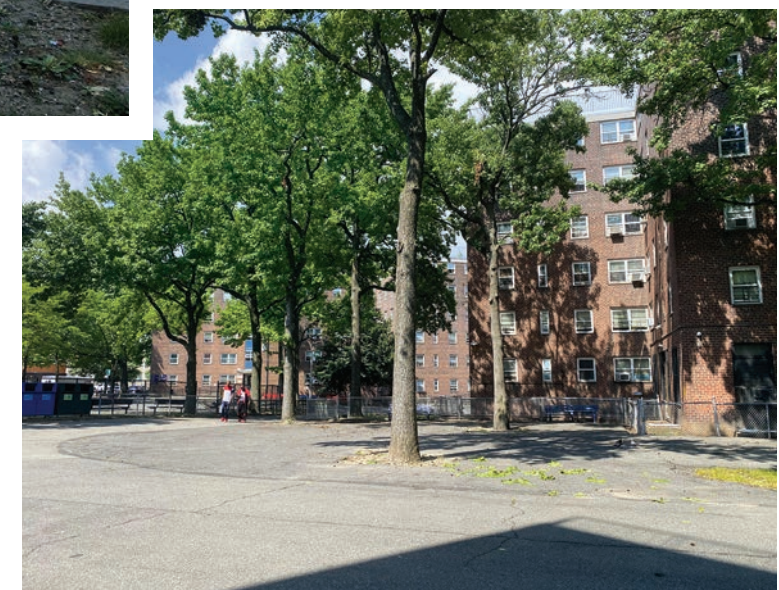
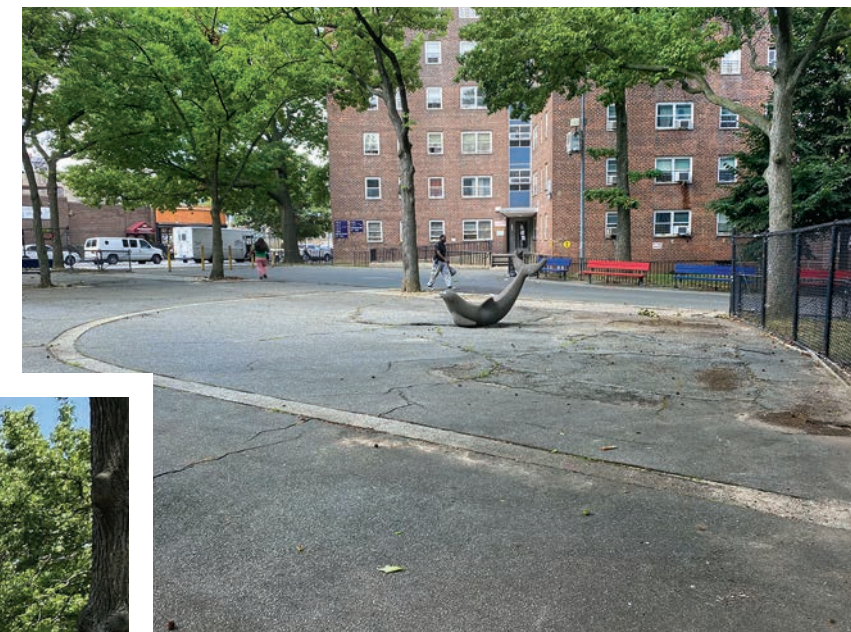
Green wants to see more skateparks and adult fitness equipment in NYCHA housing, which Owens's plans propose. But he's used to the status quo at NYCHA persisting, and wary of change when it arrives. "The whole community is exactly the way it was 30, 40 years ago," he says. "The gap



NANCY OWENS STUDIO

NANCY OWENS STUDIO

RIGHT AND BELOW
At the Kingsborough campus and elsewhere, mature trees and underpopulated playgrounds are some of the most common elements of NYCHA housing complexes.



is employment. There's been no change to the economic growth and development of these families." NYCHA is supporting controversial legislation that would allow it to lease properties to a new Public Housing Preservation Trust, which could then obtain private funding for renovations of properties, a structure that makes residents and activists nervous. And gentrification-driven displacement is a constant concern. "NYCHA is in the gentrifying business," Green says. The most obvious park landscape improvements that Green has seen in the neighborhood only arrive when white stroller moms do, too. "You're advocating for this place to be transformed, exchanged, and turned over to private interests," he says. "Say what it is."

“IT’S REALLY ABOUT STARTING THE CONVERSATION WITHIN THE COMMUNITY.”

—KATE BELSKI

BELOW
The new Kingsborough concept design slots gardens and fitness areas in between the buildings.

OPPOSITE
Richmond Barthé’s sculptural frieze is at the end of a long, loose allée, which is the defining landscape feature of the Kingsborough complex.

KINGSBOROUGH CONCEPT DESIGN

PLAY	FITNESS	BUILDING
WATER PLAY	SYNTHETIC TURF	NYC PARK
NATURE PLAY	DOG RUN	PRIMARY CIRCULATION
SEATING AREA/PLAZA	LAWN	SECONDARY CIRCULATION
PAVED PLAY/COURTS	PLANTING	



NYCHA is also looking for private dollars to fund landscape improvements and ongoing maintenance. So what’s in it for the donors? “I don’t know that we owe them anything,” Palma says. “A lot of the private parties that we’re working with see this investment as very necessary and a part of the social justice movement. Our asset continues to remain public.”

As the areas surrounding NYCHA properties are gentrified, an open space master plan that calls for “destination” parks that would draw people from across the neighborhood might not be embraced by tenants. For Chhaya, it’s easy to understand why “not everybody has bought into the larger idea of connecting this public housing to the larger city grid.” But he’s willing to take the



NANCY OWENS STUDIO, THIS PAGE AND OPPOSITE

RIGHT
Barthé's *Exodus and Dance* depicts Black figures dancing in celebration on one side and the exodus of the Israelites on the other.

OPPOSITE
The Kingsborough concept design creates a public amphitheater and focal point surrounding Barthé's sculptural frieze.

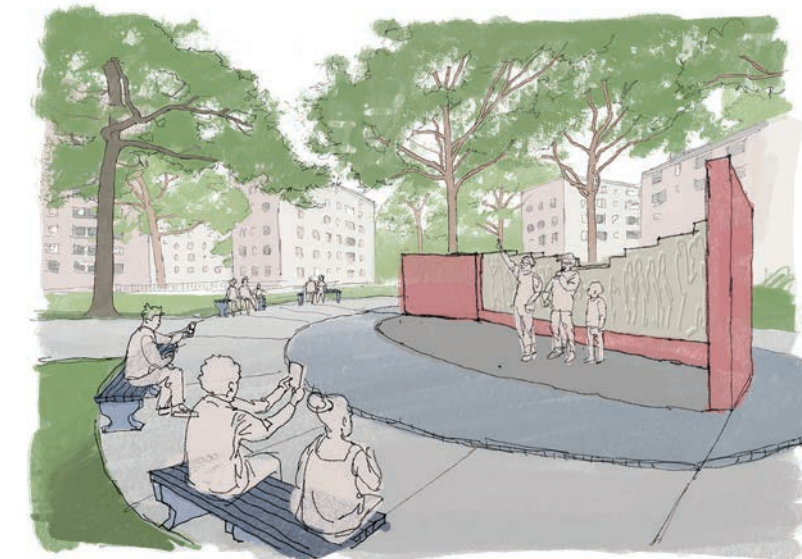


time to make the case and listen as residents make theirs. "We're here to listen," he says. "We're here to take it on the chin."

For now, the master plan is a series of loose, programmatic sketches pending deeper engagement with the community. "It's really about starting the conversation within the community," Belski says, "so that the solutions are generated within their own ideas and how they see people using the space."

NYCHA isn't releasing much in the way of budget estimates for the master plan, though Palma says that individual projects may run from \$3 to \$15 million—not much in terms of what some New Yorkers spend on public landscapes.

Two days after my tour of central Brooklyn public housing landscapes, I stopped by Little Island, an artificial island on the Hudson River designed by Heatherwick Studio and MNLA, for a brisk walk and a \$6 brown-butter chocolate-chunk cookie. It was im-



mediately apparent why its opening in 2021 was the New York City landscape design event of the year. With 400 species of plants representing every shade and texture arrayed into tightly defined microclimates, all on top of 132 concrete columns that bulge into 20-foot-wide planter "pots," it's a stunning feat of engineering, design, and high-wire arborism. It was built for a quarter-billion dollars, a sum that could immeasurably improve the lived experience of hundreds of thousands of NYCHA residents.

"It's definitely not a folly," Palma says of the NYCHA master plan. "These are people's homes. These are extremely important to the workforce of New York City. The biggest employers of NYCHA residents are the Department of Education and the Metropolitan Transportation Authority. Literally, NYCHA residents keep the city running."

Owens is disappointed with where the locus of money, power, and design is today in landscape architec-

ture. "The good ideas right now," she laments, "are in affluent neighborhoods." She studied with Garrett Eckbo and Lawrence Halprin at the University of California, Berkeley, where she learned to center social justice in the public sector as the way to fulfill landscape architecture's moral and disciplinary mission. The constraints she experiences on projects like the NYCHA open space master plan push her to be a better designer. "You have to provide good bones of your design that's going to weather a lack of maintenance," she says. "It's a challenge, but I think it's a really exciting one." ●

ZACH MORTICE IS A CHICAGO-BASED DESIGN JOURNALIST AND CRITIC WHO FOCUSES ON THE INTERSECTION OF DESIGN AND POLICY IN ARCHITECTURE AND LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE.

Project Credits

LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE NANCY OWENS STUDIO, NEW YORK CITY; GRAIN COLLECTIVE, BROOKLYN, NEW YORK. **CLIENT** NEW YORK CITY HOUSING AUTHORITY. **COST ESTIMATOR** SHERPA CONSTRUCTION CONSULTING, WOODSIDE, NEW YORK. **ENVIRONMENTAL DESIGN CONSULTANT** NATURAL LEARNING INITIATIVE, COLLEGE OF DESIGN, NORTH CAROLINA STATE UNIVERSITY, RALEIGH, NORTH CAROLINA. **COPYWRITING** WORDSHOP, BROOKLYN, NEW YORK. **VIDEOGRAPHY** LISANDRO PEREZ-REY, NEW YORK CITY. **ILLUSTRATOR** SUYU CHEN, ROCHESTER, NEW YORK. **REPORT AND VIDEO WRITTEN NARRATIVE** LAUREN BELSKI, NEW YORK CITY.