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EDITOR

Every few generations, architects and urban designers help to transform New York's physical fabric, a shift that sets the outlines of development for decades to come. The institution of the street grid in 1811, Frederick Law Olmsted's 19th century landscape visions, and the skyscraper boom in the 1960s were all moments of radical transformation. We are in the midst of another moment of extraordinary change, and one organization has been working to make sure that the public realm is not forgotten in the process.

It is hard to remember that barely a decade ago architects, landscape architects, and graphic design firms were barely involved in public sector work in New York. However, in 1995 Andrea Woodner founded the Design Trust for Public Space to help city agencies and community groups work collaboratively with the designers to improve the public space of the city. The organization helped re-emphasize the importance of architecture in the city.

Every 18 months, the Design Trust selects the best urban design projects submitted from across the five boroughs and provides financial help for further development. The organization believes that design initiatives can only succeed if the appropriate city agencies are on board early, and will not accept a proposal unless the relevant agency has signed off on the project. It often helps applying agencies and groups to assemble teams and write their proposals before they submit their applications. The Design Trust thus helps forge unexpected working relationships that have created remarkable solutions to complicated public space issues. It supported reuse of the High Line, as well as the High Performance Building Guidelines, which help the city build greener buildings. Other projects have included the design of children's community gardens across the city, a graphic wayfinding design program to connect art facilities in Queens, and an initiative to have all taxis operating on hybrid automobile platforms by 2012.

This past month I served as a juror on the Design Trust's latest funding round. We were presented with many well-crafted and smart proposals, and settled on two projects to fund: Closing the Gap: Rethinking Grand Army Plaza and Park Design for the 21st Century. The Grand Army Plaza Coalition's proposal to reroute the roads around the difficult and inaccessible traffic island-cum-monument is such a brilliantly obvious solution that one wonders why it hasn't been tried before. The roadbed between the plaza and Prospect Park will be closed and used on the weekends for a farmer's market, allowing pedestrians to actually access this beautiful space without having to cross many lanes of traffic. (This will all be accomplished without denying drivers access from Flatbush and Vanderbilt avenues and Eastern Parkway to Prospect Park West.) The second proposal to receive funding is Park Design for the 21st Century, which is an effort by the Department of Parks and Recreation to rethink its own guidelines and establish codes to "conserve energy, save water, and improve the visitor experience" in city parks.

We are in a golden moment of design collaboration between the city and its design community, and this is due in no small part to the efforts of the Design Trust for Public Space and its unique method of funding, brilliant eye for projects, and belief in the value of a vibrant civic realm.

WILLIAM MENKING