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IS THE GRAND CONCOURSE NEW YORK'S NEXT HIGHLINE?

An Ideas Competition for The Bronx Wins an International Response

Bronx, NY—From aerial bike lanes looping like ribbons above a green corridor to gleaming space-age like pavilions lifted off the ground to allow traffic to pass underneath, the results of an ideas competition co-sponsored by The Bronx Museum of the Arts and Design Trust for Public Space has generated bold new visions for the Grand Concourse. Entitled *Intersections: Grand Concourse Beyond 100*, the competition is timed to the centennial of the storied thoroughfare.

“The Grand Concourse has the potential to become the city’s most adventurous and livable urban experiment,” says Holly Block, director, The Bronx Museum of the Arts. “A visionary feat of city planning when it opened in November 1909, today we recognize it as a priceless resource, its potential never clearer than as imagined in this competition.”

By midnight on the deadline in early May, almost 400 people from more than 25 countries had submitted proposals to *Intersections: Grand Concourse Beyond 100*. The proposals came from leading architects, emerging architects and designers, city planners who have spent decades on the subject of the Bronx, and visionaries from Australia, Korea, Japan, Europe, South Africa and Mexico.

“In reviewing the proposals, we observed a generational shift. Today, emerging architects and city planners see the Bronx as an alluring destination for culture and cool, and fertile ground for design innovation—not as a broken place in need of repair,” says Deborah Marton, director, Design Trust for Public Space.

A picture emerges from the nearly 200 submissions of a new, green Grand Concourse where all kinds of people gather and along which different modes of transportation

flow—from pedestrian, bicycle, and car traffic to light rail. The ideas submitted are as low-tech as planting of a four-mile farm where cows can graze and as high tech as installing interactive walls that would allow pedestrians on the Grand Concourse to communicate with people in other cities around the world.

In late July, an independent jury will announce the selection of seven finalists. Renderings, drawings, models, and writings describing the winning concepts will be showcased at The Bronx Museum of the Arts on the Grand Concourse at 167th Street in an exhibition entitled *Intersections: The Grand Concourse Beyond 100*, opening November 1, 2009 and will remain on view till January 4, 2010. Up to 50 more submissions, designated as honorable mentions, will be displayed simultaneously in digital form in the Museum's Lobby and online at the competition website: www.grandconcourse100.org.

As well as occasioning the ideas competition, the centenary of the Grand Concourse proved an inspiration. For many entrants, the roots of the storied thoroughfare in the grand Parisian boulevards of the 19th century was a touchstone for re-envisioning its future. A number of entrants cited the original plantings of trees and other landscaping as well as non-motorized uses that have been lost over the last century. Others noted that the width of the present lanes mitigates against the kind of traffic flow best suited to a boulevard such as the Grand Concourse. Altogether, the pervasive assessment running through the vast majority of proposals is that the Grand Concourse should be transformed from a thoroughfare for cars into a dynamic new public space for people with separate strands for transportation modes and activities.

Perhaps as a reaction to the disastrous urban planning of the 1950 and 60s, many of the best submissions modestly utilize existing infrastructure through the development of informal and adaptable spaces. A few submissions recapture existing public space by looking upward, whether it be by creating nodules of raised platforms or by greening the roofs atop existing apartment buildings along what one entrant called the “art deco cliffs.” Others looked below grade, placing new plazas and civic buildings in subterranean spaces or, more simply, laying a glass ceiling atop an existing subway station. Still others see opportunities in living green walls, outdoor cafes, and the repurposing of the space between apartment buildings into shared mixed-use “alleys.”

“This competition comes at an extraordinarily opportune time. While good work has been done in recent years in the Bronx, by both city agencies and the private sector, a clear plan for the borough as a whole and the Concourse specifically has yet to emerge. A good number of these submissions address this core question,” says Marton.

The *Intersections* competition and the resulting exhibition are the final part of the year-long celebration organized by The Bronx Museum of the Arts to examine the past, present and future of the Grand Concourse and the Bronx. For many years the exploration of urban design and architecture has been a core mission of The Bronx Museum, which has contributed such exhibitions as *Devastation/ Resurrection: The South Bronx* (1980), *Building a Borough: Architecture and Planning in the Bronx* (1986) and *Urban Mythologies: The Bronx Represented Since the 1960s* (1999) to the national dialogue on these subjects. Founded in 1971, today the Museum is the flagship cultural institution of the Bronx. (www.bronxmuseum.org)

In the Design Trust for Public Space, The Bronx Museum found a perfect partner to co-organize and sponsor the *Intersections* competition. Having helped to realize more than two dozen public/private projects in New York City since 1995, the Design Trust is currently helping to create a set of sustainable guidelines for New York City's 29,000 acres of parkland. Most recently the Design Trust has mounted successful competitions to re-envision Grand Army Plaza in Brooklyn and the New York City taxicab. The nonprofit organization is unique in forging public/private partnerships that improve the quality of the city's public realm—from parks, plazas and streets to public buildings and modes of transportation. (www.designtrust.org)

Jury

Members of the jury for the *Intersections* competition are **Stan Allen**, Stan Allen Architect / Dean, Princeton University School of Architecture; **Carlos Brillembourg**, Brillembourg Architects; **Monty Freeman**, Belmont Freeman Architects; **Anthony Greene**, The Bronx County Historical Society; Dr. **Clara Rodriguez**, Dept. of Sociology and Anthropology, Fordham University; **Tim Rollins**, Artist, Founder of Kids of Survival (K.O.S.); **Wilhelm Ronda**, Director of Planning and Development, Office of Bronx Borough President; **Galia Solomonoff**, Solomonoff Architecture Studio; **Susan Szenasy**, Editor-in-Chief, *Metropolis*; **TATS CRU**, Bronx-based professional muralists.