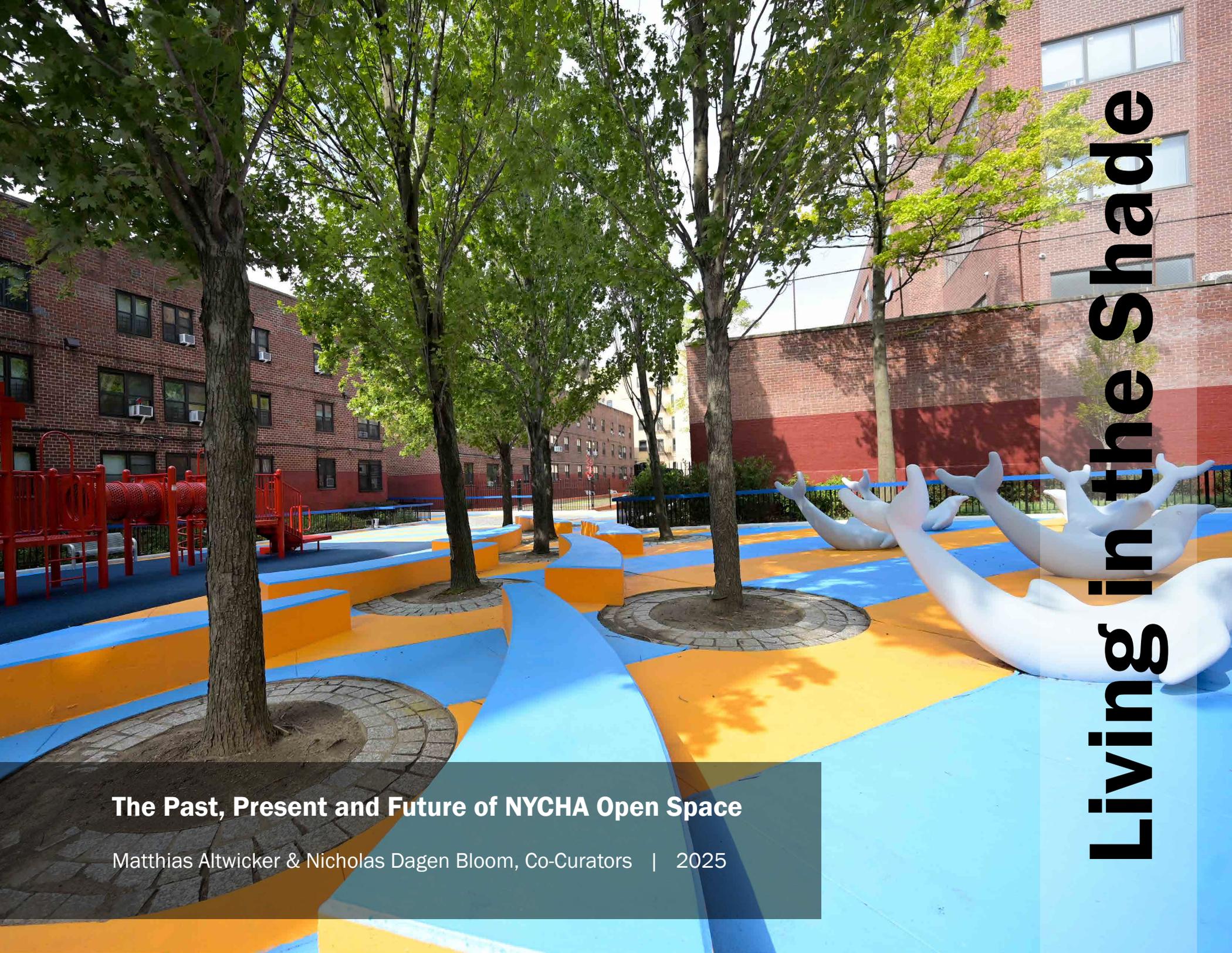


Living in the Shade

The Past, Present and Future of NYCHA Open Space

Matthias Altwicker & Nicholas Dagen Bloom, Co-Curators | 2025



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Installations & Credits

Fx Collaborative Galleries
LaGuardia Community College
National Public Housing Museum
Acknowledgments & Credits

Overview

This exhibition offers a fresh perspective on New York's public housing landscapes, revisiting the changing design strategies and lived experience. NYCHA administrators devoted far more acreage to lawns and paths than buildings because they were convinced that, in contrast to the city's tenement blocks, NYCHA grounds would "ventilate the neighborhood." By 1961, NYCHA buildings covered just 300 of 1540 acres in the portfolio; the vision of green and pastoral superblocs had been achieved. The reality of these spaces for residents and managers on the ground was more complex than the planners imagined, leading to decades of creative placemaking designed to overcome unanticipated challenges



The exhibition is comprised of historical and contemporary photographs, drawings, and site plans, showing the changing dynamics of NYCHA open space planning over the last 90 years. A series of large-scale comparative models analyze open space programming, surfaces, vegetation, and playground development. The show examines how initial efforts to integrate nature into living environments evolved to meet residents' changing needs, particularly as active recreation and community programs became a priority in the 1950s and beyond.

Open Space Models

Harlem River Houses | built 1935



Ocean Bay Houses | built 1953



Washington Houses | built 1957



Stephen Wise Towers | built 1962



Urban Planning Models

The urban planning models are indicative of shifting NYCHA policies from superblock to tower in the park. The two projects - Patterson Houses and Roosevelt Houses roughly equal in population and acreage yet very different in their use of open space both show how the decentralized superblock planning that lacked central areas and resident oversight became the tower in the park strategy that increased area allotted to parking, decreased play areas, and less varied vegetation with unshaded areas.



Patterson Houses | built 1950



Roosevelt Houses | built 1961



The open spaces in both projects are undergoing development via Green Space Connections, an initiative informed by an in-depth participatory design process and a resident capacity-building program that will lead to activation of revitalized open spaces. It is implemented by the Center for Justice Innovation in partnership with The Fund for Public Space, and New York City Housing Authority, and supported by a Helmsley Foundation Grant.

Playground Equipment

NYCHA playgrounds were experimental and innovative, developing and implementing different types of playground equipment with a variety of activities and age groups. The models show the range of forms, uses, and types of play available.



Historical Planning Typologies

Since 1934, the New York City Authority has devoted more attention and resources to landscape design and management than peer American housing authorities. And it shows. Despite deferred maintenance, NYCHA superblocs are still more wooded and verdant than now-destroyed public housing communities like Cabrini-Green or Pruitt-Igoe ever were.

This praise of the NYCHA landscaped superblocs differs from saying designers and managers always got it right. The Authority started in the 1930s with very high-quality landscape design and strayed far from these in postwar tower blocks that standardized landscapes and play equipment. By the 1950s, as resident needs and habits changed, administrators retooled the grounds to encourage more active recreation.



View of the De Kalb Houses, now called Eleanor Roosevelt, in Bedford-Stuyvesant. Circa 1960.



After RAD work of the playground at the Betances Houses.



Lew Alcindor and Emmette Bryant at summer basketball clinics at Marcy Houses, 1968.



Flower bed at Lafayette Gardens for the annual competition for best flower garden, 1972.

**“Through its landscape design program, the Authority has restored greenery to the arid canyons of the city.”
— New York City Housing Authority, 1961**

Each generation of NYCHA leadership has left its mark on the landscape, reflecting successive eras of best-practice community planning. Basketball courts displaced some lawns, creative playgrounds substituted for standardized equipment, and rugged steel replaced chain link fences. Community gathering spaces, tenant gardens, murals, and public art undergo renovation and redesign when funding allows.

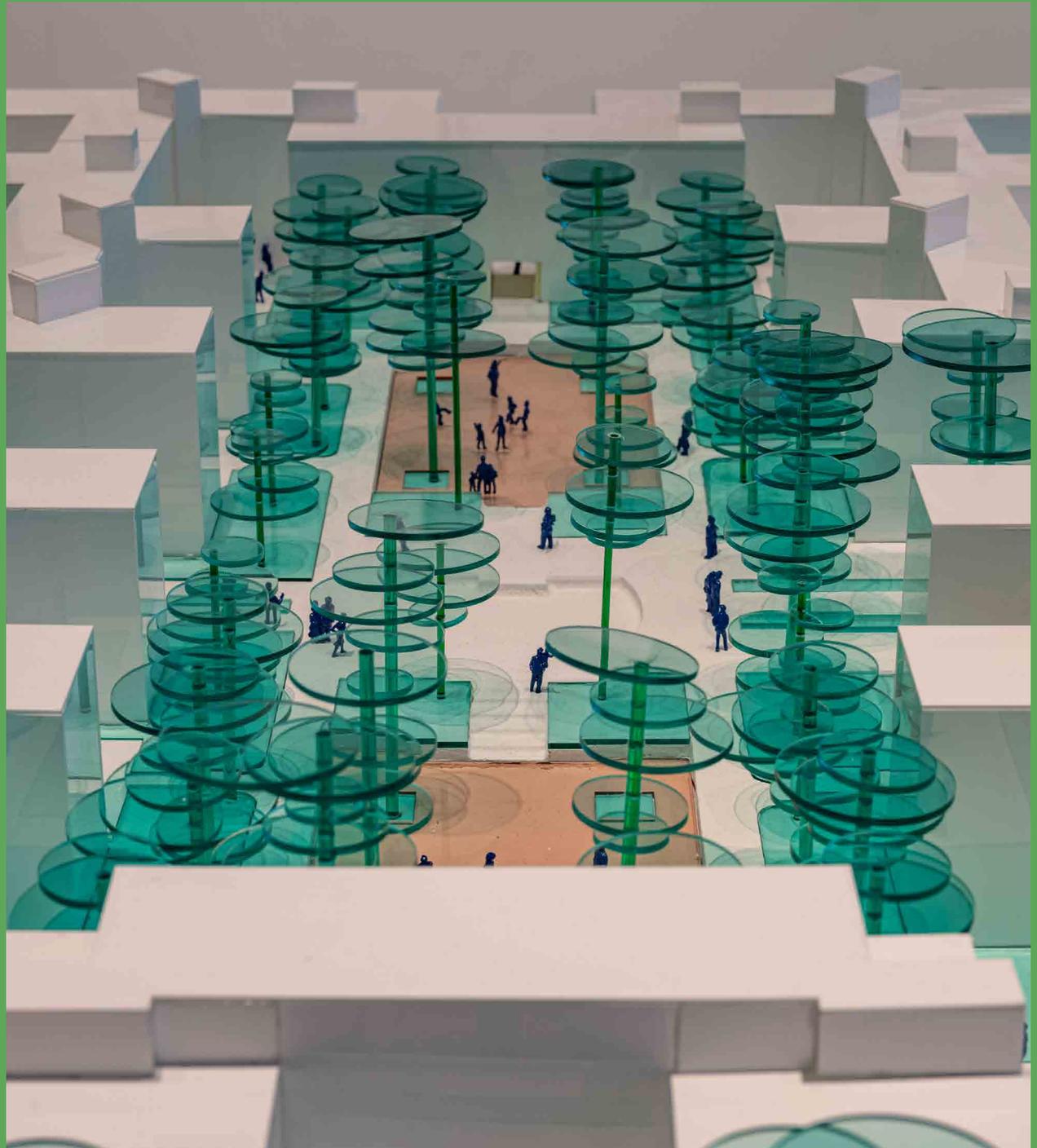
NYCHA’s current management actively seeks new approaches and partners to restore meaning, resilience, community, and fun to its open spaces. At long last, residents play a more direct role in reshaping their communities, which may result in a more lasting and satisfying solution for community needs.

Courtyards

The first NYCHA developments set high standards of open-space design, on par with the best private housing of its time. First Houses (1936) replaced a crowded block of tenements on the Lower East Side with a set of generously spaced brick buildings. The residents benefitted from private gathering and sitting spaces with playgrounds, custom public art, cobblestone plazas, trees, and community-facing ground-floor retail along Avenue A.

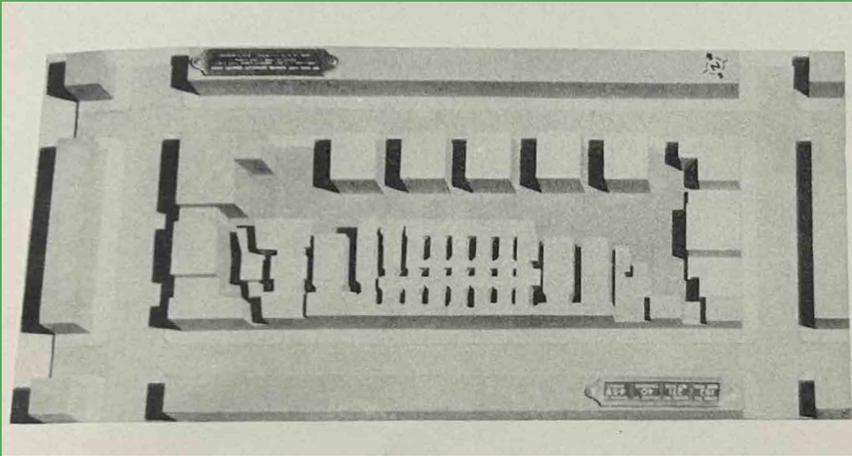
Larger, low-rise PWA-sponsored projects such as Harlem River Houses (1937) and Williamsburg Houses (1938) welcomed year-round air and light into well-defined courtyards lined by trees, plentiful seating, public art, wading pools, community facilities, and playgrounds.

These early developments remain well-loved today, with both Williamsburg and Harlem River Houses recently renovated as part of the PACT/RAD program. Their long-term success reflects the impact of high-quality design on resident satisfaction.



Harlem River Houses model.

First Houses | built 1936

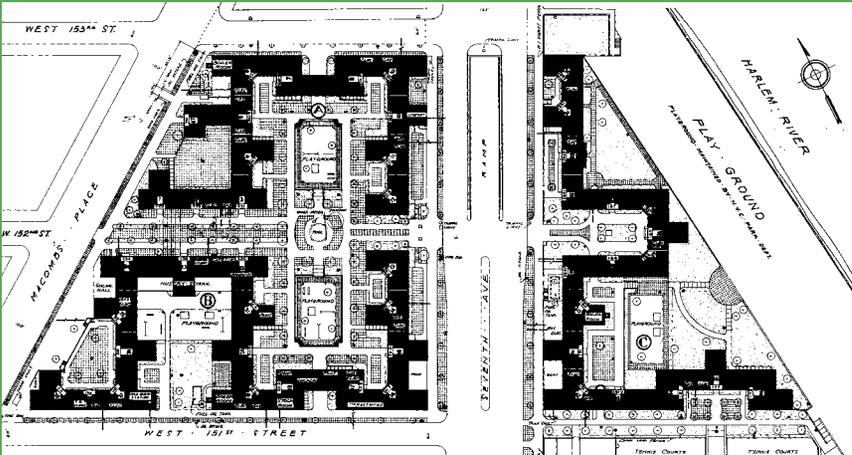


First Houses Model from the 1935 NYCHA Density Study.



Residents of First Houses enjoy the courtyard, 1939.

Harlem River Houses | built 1937



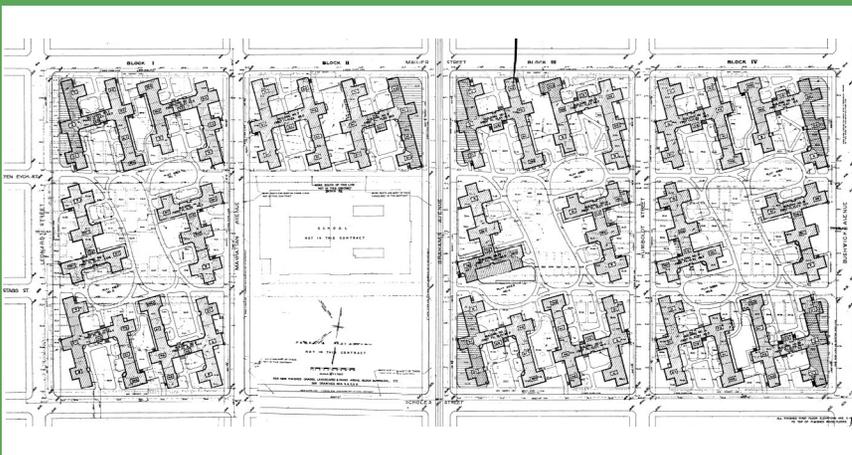
Harlem River Houses Plan, 1935.



The courtyard of newly opened Houses, 1938.

See case study:
"Harlem River"

Williamsburg Houses | built 1938



Plan of Williamsburg Houses, 1936.



Williamsburg Houses in Brooklyn, 1939.



View of the newly painted basketball court at the Williamsburg Houses.



The courtyards in Harlem River functioned as playgrounds.



View of space around the fountain at Harlem River Houses.

**“Playgrounds are established as a community substitute for the back yard,
the climbing apparatus for trees and hay lofts of a normal childhood.”**
— NYCHA Exec. Director of Community Planning, Catherine Lansing, 1935



The children's playground at Harlem River Houses, August 15, 1972.

Superblocks

At the end of the 1930s, in the search for lower-cost mass housing, Harlem River Houses's strictly defined block structure gave way to regimented, standardized red brick towers in low-density superblocks. Superblocks combined typical neighborhood blocks into larger, continuous properties by closing down streets and opening the block perimeter, changing the clarity of building orientation and access to entries. The Queensbridge Houses (1940) and Red Hook Houses (1939), with their massive scale, low land coverage, 6-story elevator buildings, and repetitive design, reflect this economizing vision.



Aerial view of the Queensbridge Houses.



Red Hook Houses under construction.

NYCHA's power to demolish tenements and close streets created vast areas for lawns, long rows of trees, multiple playgrounds, and benches. Abundant sunlight, greenery, and shade for hot summers were, in the eyes of administrators, an inexpensive way to compensate for the value engineering of the buildings.



Design of Queensbridge Houses, circa 1938.



Queensbridge Houses.

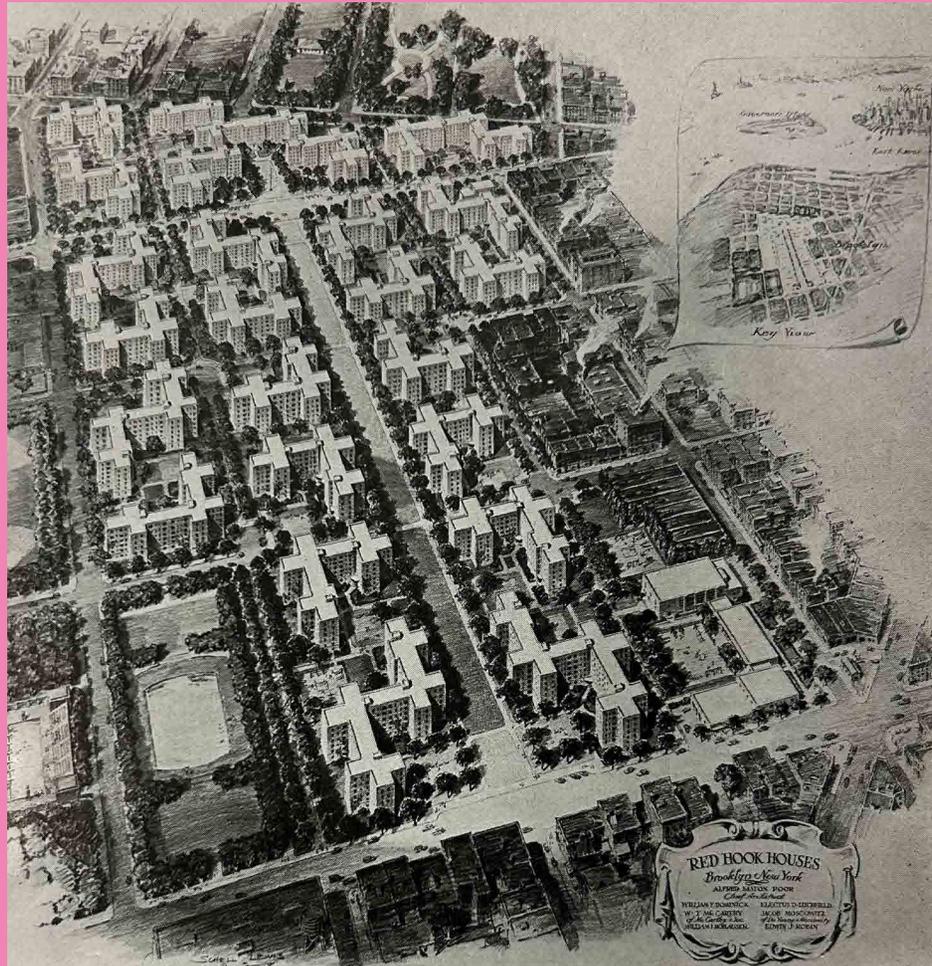


Children playing outside the Queensbridge Houses in 1940.

Designers at East River Houses (1940) and Fort Greene Houses (1944) adapted the superblock for taller and even more economical buildings. Despite NYCHA community staff concerns about the social impact of high-rises on family life and social order, the Tower in the Park pattern of NYCHA landscape design was firmly established.



Red Hook Houses.



Design of Red Hook Houses, from the NYCHA Annual Report 1938.



Family walking through the Red Hook housing development.

“Superblocks eased congestion, facilitated the flow of traffic, and provided larger outside areas for residential dwellings...”
— NYCHA Chairman, Alfred Rheinsein



Every group of buildings is surrounded by trees and grass with a courtyard where children can play.

Towers in the Park

From the 1940s through the 1960s, the Tower-in-the-Park superbloc strategy dominated NYCHA planning thanks to funding constraints, modern construction methods, and the dominant architectural fashion. Ambitious NYCHA production goals focused on quantitative totals, as city leaders optimistically promised that public housing could mitigate destructive urban renewal and highway programs. By 1961, NYCHA boasted of demolishing “831 acres of slums,” but a low percentage of displaced city residents moved into new NYCHA apartments.

Here in spacious George Washington Carver Houses in Manhattan's Upper East Side reside 1,246 families, many of whom are very active in community affairs via the Carver Tenants Association. A large number of the families formerly lived on the site, which was laden with sub-standard housing.

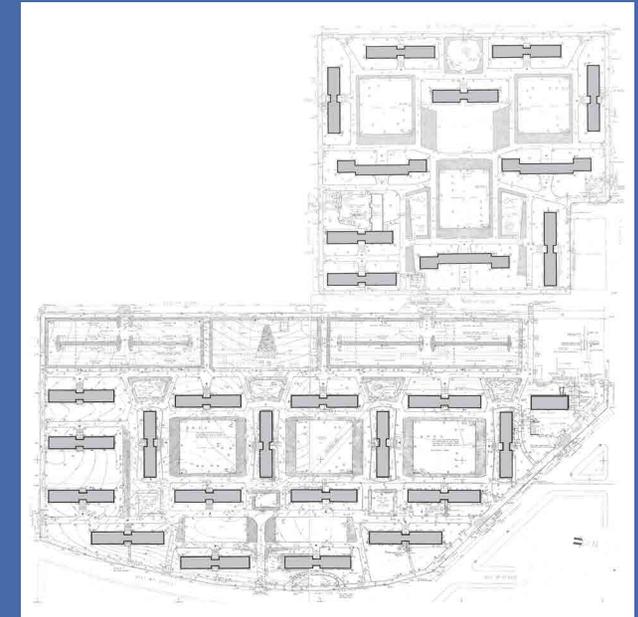


Aerial view of the Carver Houses.

Those lucky enough to receive a new NYCHA apartment enjoyed many benefits. Regardless of location or site conditions, campuses contained a mix of high-rise and mid-rise brick buildings set in open spaces studded by trees, lawns, benches, and playgrounds. NYCHA leaders officially celebrated in 1961 how “the playgrounds, malls, and other facilities provide leisure-time relaxation for all ages.” However, the vastness of the new open space posed an immediate management challenge.

“Our efforts have too often resulted in a stereotyped, monotonous atmosphere. High-rise buildings are even, symmetrically placed on a leveled-off site. Trees are then placed at 40’ intervals along walks, playgrounds... and sitting areas are inserted. This is not design.”

— NYCHA Landscape Architect, Luciano Miceli, 1962



Marlboro Houses Plan, 1958.

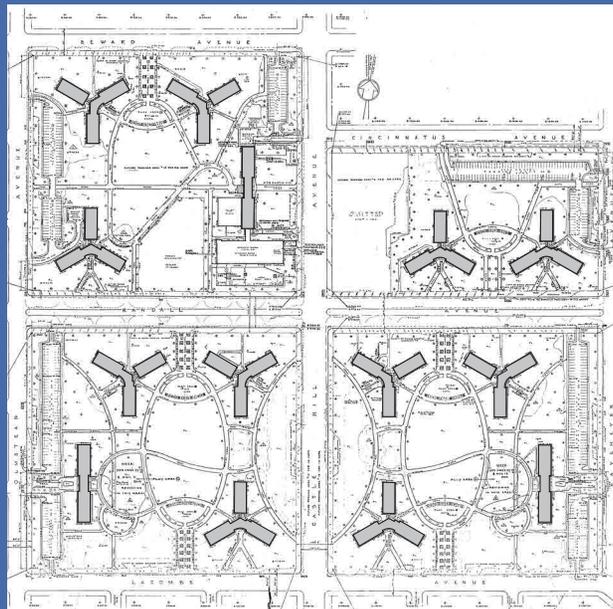
Marlboro Houses typifies the design and landscaping of the 1950s Authority. NYCHA Annual Report 1962.

Observant NYCHA managers expressed concerns about the viability of the towers in the park for families in the 1940s and 1950s. However, the critics were ignored as NYCHA scaled up under the sway of planner Robert Moses. By the mid-1960s, most of the NYCHA portfolio was complete, with space for nearly 180,000 families—mainly in the Towers in the Park.

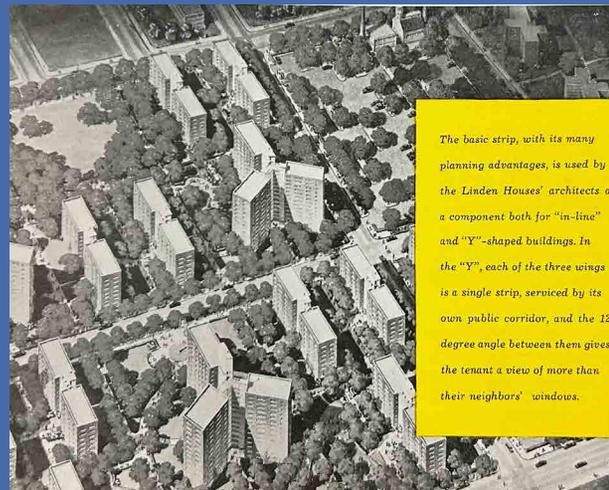
By 1961, 80% of all NYCHA land was open space.



Comparative urban models of Patterson Houses (1950) and Roosevelt Houses (1961).



Castle Hill Houses Plan, 1959.



The basic strip, with its many planning advantages, is used by the Linden Houses' architects as a component both for "in-line" and "Y"-shaped buildings. In the "Y", each of the three wings is a single strip, serviced by its own public corridor, and the 120 degree angle between them gives the tenant a view of more than their neighbors' windows.

Architectural Design of the Linden Houses.

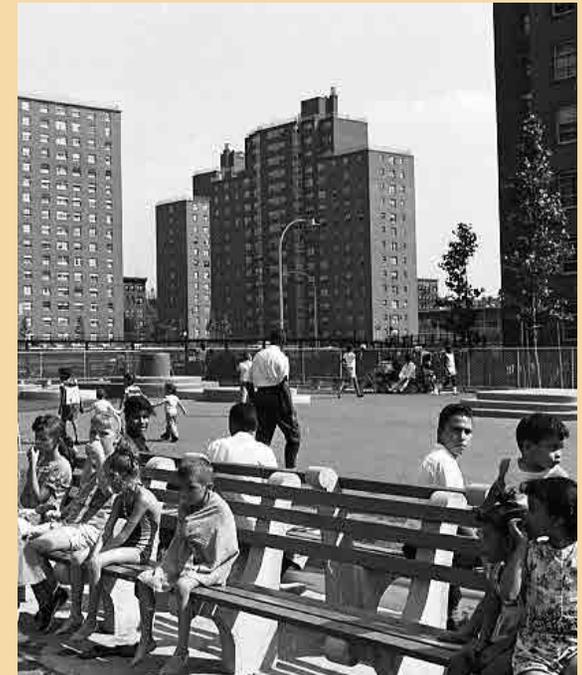
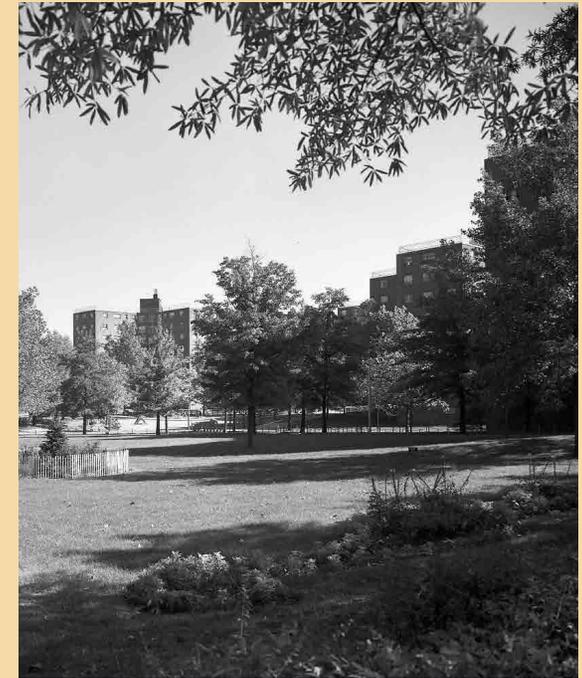


Courtyard of the newly opened Dyckman Houses.

Open Space Elements

The various components of the open space in NYCHA projects can be placed in four categories: Surfaces, Vegetation, Art, and Playgrounds.

The way each of these has been designed and articulated has adapted as needs of the community and concerns for maintenance and safety have changed. The variations of these adaptations is a testament to the way in which NYCHA residents, staff, and designers have continuously pursued solutions to the challenges of open space.



Surfaces

A typical NYCHA campus intermixed hard and soft surfaces. The soft landscape was in lawns, with trees intermixed, to create a pastoral, quiet setting within the city, primarily for passive enjoyment from benches or windows. These lawns were crisscrossed by active paved paths for circulation, linking exterior sidewalks to a hardscape of building entries, playgrounds, parking, and maintenance facilities.

Maintaining these spaces long-term became a major administrative and fiscal challenge. A large staff labored to mow hundreds of acres of grass, rake seasonal leaves, trim trees, repair playgrounds, plow snow, and maintain thousands of benches. By 1959, NYCHA spent \$5 million annually on landscape maintenance, with over 1100 permanent and seasonal workers.



View of the building entrances and passage of Harlem River Houses, 1938.

“The landscaped uncrowded area should ventilate the neighborhood.”
 — Alfred Rheinsein, Editorial, Undated, ca. 1939

See case study:
 “Harlem River”

Surface Permeability -
 Average

43%
PERMEABLE

Harlem River
 Houses

30%
PERMEABLE

Ocean Bay
 Houses

46%
PERMEABLE

Washington
 Houses

62%
PERMEABLE

Stephen Wise
 Towers

17%
PERMEABLE

Patterson
 Houses

55%
PERMEABLE

Roosevelt
 Houses

35%
PERMEABLE

Surface Materials

NYCHA has cycled through various materials since its founding, including cobblestones, concrete, asphalt, multi-colored pavers, sandboxes, and rubber mats for playgrounds. When funding was substantial, NYCHA invested deeply in high-quality materials. However, these otherwise robust materials fell into disrepair as the NYCHA finances worsened.

Only 43% of the land surface on NYCHA is permeable.



Paved courtyards are adjacent to each apartment house in Red Hook housing development, Brooklyn.



Pavers at Harlem River Houses.



Asphalted center walk of Harlem River Houses.

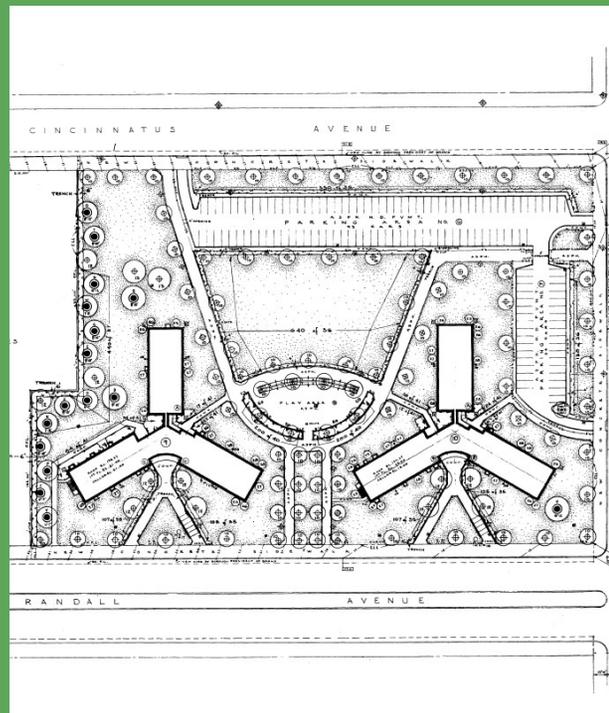


Concrete playground of Harlem River Houses.

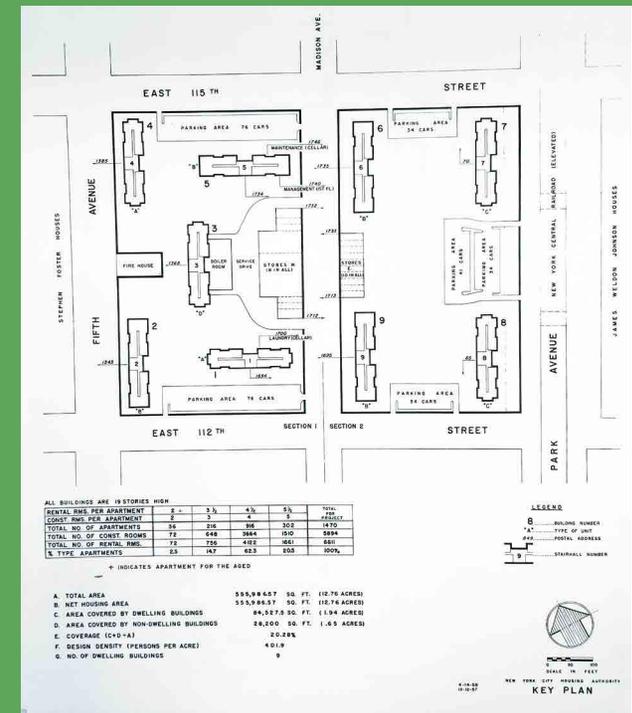
Parking

NYCHA has built parking lots on many properties for the convenience of residents and staff. The parking program was among the more successful and popular open space initiatives, as many residents appreciated below-market parking rates. Including parking in public housing developments far from subway lines enabled a more suburban, garden apartment lifestyle for many postwar residents.

Many of these parking lots will likely be redeveloped or infilled in the future as the city seeks sites for more affordable housing.



Partial plan of Castle Hill Houses showing parking.



Parking area planning at Taft Houses.



Roosevelt model highlights the numerous parking lots spread across the site.



Parking spaces located between buildings at Roosevelt Houses.

Vegetation

NYCHA's extreme open space ratios are a management challenge, but many underappreciated benefits exist. Before widespread air conditioning, the need for natural cooling of outdoor and indoor spaces for large residential populations influenced the scale of NYCHA open space. Hot summers in the 1950s and 1960s brought many children and adults outside, leading to heavier usage of the grounds and play facilities.

The grounds are quieter today, but they still provide green space and porous surfaces; NYCHA landscapes are up to 10 degrees cooler than adjacent neighborhoods.



View of the Eastchester Gardens, 1967.

NYCHA's open spaces support about 1,000 acres of tree canopy, which contribute to lowering temperatures inside campuses by 2° F compared to outside.

See case study:
"Roosevelt Houses"

Tree Canopy Change in
10 years - Average

34%
CANOPY COVER

Harlem River
Houses

8%
CANOPY GAIN

Ocean Bay
Houses

47%
CANOPY LOSS

Washington
Houses

30%
CANOPY GAIN

Stephen Wise
Towers

18%
CANOPY LOSS

Patterson
Houses

4%
CANOPY LOSS

Roosevelt
Houses

70%
CANOPY LOSS

Tree Planting

NYCHA's tree canopy results from managers diligently following the initial planting program. Between 1950 and 1960, for instance, NYCHA "planted over 26,000 shade trees, 22,000 minor trees, nearly 300,000 miscellaneous hedge plants," and hundreds of thousands of shrubs.

The NYCHA canopy provides shade and cooling today but remains under stress thanks to deferred maintenance, tree death, changing climate, and saltwater intrusion due to Hurricane Sandy.



Courtyard gardens at Jacob Riis Houses on the Lower East Side, 1960.



Aerial View of Ravenswood Houses.



Vladeck Houses, from Water and Jackson Streets toward Madison Street, 1940.



The Brownsville Houses club in the annual flower garden competition, 1972.



The garden at Tilden Houses in Brooklyn, c. 1970s.



New York has been “greened” by thousands of tenant gardeners who plot gardens at their projects.

Tenant Gardens

NYCHA helped organize an extensive community garden program. Residents frequently turned small fenced areas into productive flower and vegetable gardens, a rare instance where NYCHA permitted resident personalization in exterior spaces. The plots remained small, regardless of demand, but the activity was popular enough for NYCHA to sponsor an annual garden competition.

By 1981 there were over 1,000 tenant gardens throughout NYCHA projects.

Public Art

Since the early First Houses project, NYCHA has decorated their grounds and buildings with various displays of art, ranging from murals to playful sculptures that doubled as play equipment. These proved enduring and durable parts of some campuses and some have been renovated in recent years.

NYCHA continues to collaborate with professional artists and community-based organizations to expand and enrich the lives of their residents.



Various animal statues by W.P.A. artists surround the courtyard fountain at First Houses.

NYCHA Advisory Council on the Arts: “... a practical program to bring color and beauty into...gathering spaces through sculpture, paintings, mosaics, murals, and other art forms.”

— NYCHA Annual Report 1960



Teenagers employed by the federal anti-poverty program painting steps at Johnson Houses, 1966.



Children's mural on the outside wall at Wald Houses, 1967.



Artist's mural on the passage wall at Harlem River Houses, 1967.

Murals

Early murals at developments like Harlem River (1937) and Queensbridge Houses (1940) were made possible by New Deal-era funding for the arts, and architects integrated them into the design. Murals have found renewed popularity since the nineteen sixties, usually as part of a community-oriented program to brighten up the base of buildings and build a sense of neighborhood pride.

Public Sculptures

The architects integrated public sculpture into the design of NYCHA grounds. Free-standing and applied animal sculpture have delighted several generations of children, and are a main motif of these campuses. Harlem River Houses (1937) included cast sculptures, two of which celebrate African American culture. Subsequent sculptures in the “towers in the parks” followed, but they were primarily standalone pieces.



Sculptural reliefs created for the courtyard at First Houses by W.P.A. artists.



1930s bear sculpture at Harlem River playground.



One of the Harlem River Houses human sculptures.



Children with a statue at Johnson Houses, 1949.

Experimenting with Art and Community

In 1964 as an experiment in playground design, NYCHA commissioned well-known artist Constantino Nivola to create various artworks for the Wise Towers project. These included an entrance wall sculpture, an 80 foot long mural, two pyramids serving as fountain and the famous eighteen horses.

See case study:
"Wise Towers"



The community plaza at Stephen Wise Towers.



Artist Nivola working on his stucco relief, 1964.



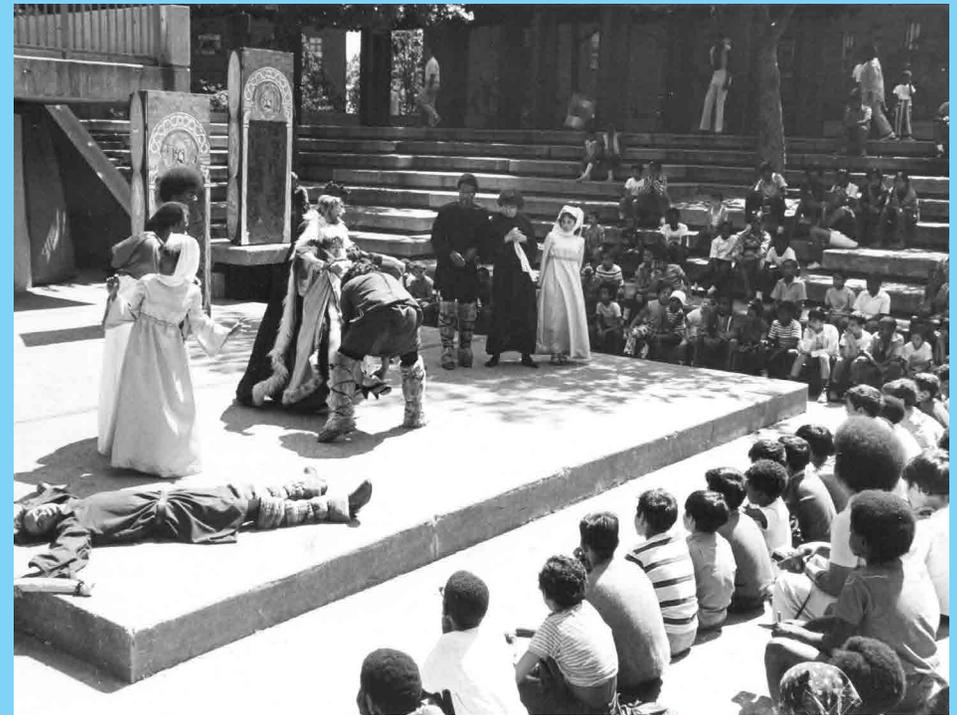
The entrance wall sculpture for the playground at Stephen Wise Towers, by artist Constantino Nivola, c. 1964.

Performances

NYCHA residents have used outdoor spaces for many activities, including movies, talent shows, birthday parties, and concerts. In the 1960s, as part of a citywide cultural decentralization program, some NYCHA grounds hosted additional concerts or theatrical performances; a few took place in custom-designed amphitheaters.



A children's chorale performs at the amphitheater at Jacob Riis houses, c. 1970s.



NYCHA kids watching a play performed at Riis Houses. July 9, 1971.



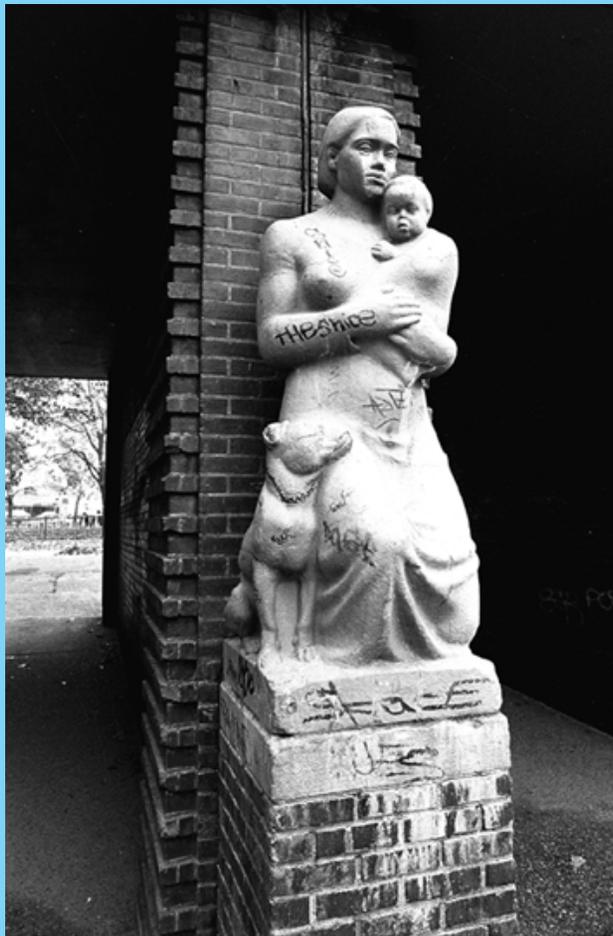
Tenant symphonic orchestra performing outside Ravenswood Houses, c.1970s.

Vandalism

Maintaining this complex landscape and the buildings proved more difficult than anticipated. Works of art, playgrounds, plantings, and fences suffered damage as New York entered an era of postwar disinvestment with higher crime and social disorder. NYCHA has struggled to pay for the renovation of its outdoor portfolio when the buildings alone need billions of dollars to maintain habitability.



A neglected sculpture in the children's playground at Red Hook.



Harlem River sculpture marred by graffiti, 1985.



Frieze at Kingsborough Houses "Green Pastures: Walls of Jericho," covered with graffiti, 1973.

Playgrounds

NYCHA was committed from their first projects to the design of playground equipment. Early equipment was loosely themed around vehicles (boats, trains, airplanes) and construction elements (brick walls, concrete tubes, wood piles)- using off-the-shelf, inexpensive materials.

In the 50s and 60s, equipment became sculptural and organic, with space-age themes. NYCHA also invested development in timber structures, making varied adventure landscapes. These were mostly commissioned from outside designers.

Standardized equipment became the norm until recent, location specific designs that combined varied play options with sustainable materials.



View of playground, 1950 .

“Instead of building large lawns that nobody can walk on, we’ll build more and bigger playgrounds.”

— William Reid, NYCHA Chair, 1958

See case study:
“Wise Towers”

Playground sf per child -
Average

44 sf
per child

Harlem River
Houses

56 sf
per child

Ocean Bay Houses

40 sf
per child

Washington
Houses

32 sf
per child

Stephen Wise
Towers

178 sf
per child

Patterson Houses

44 sf
per child

Roosevelt Houses

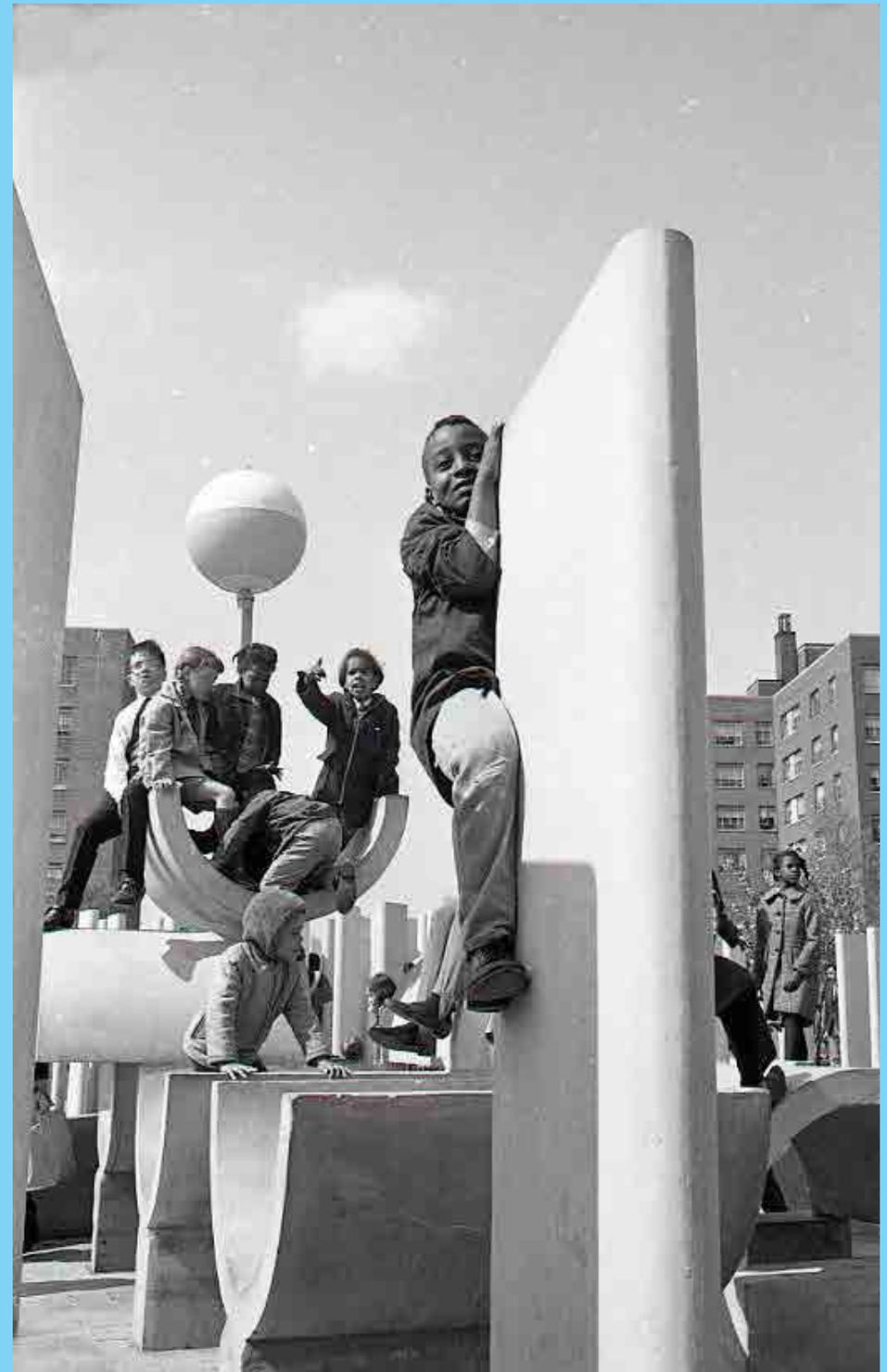
51 sf
per child



Children's playground at Washington Houses, 1959.



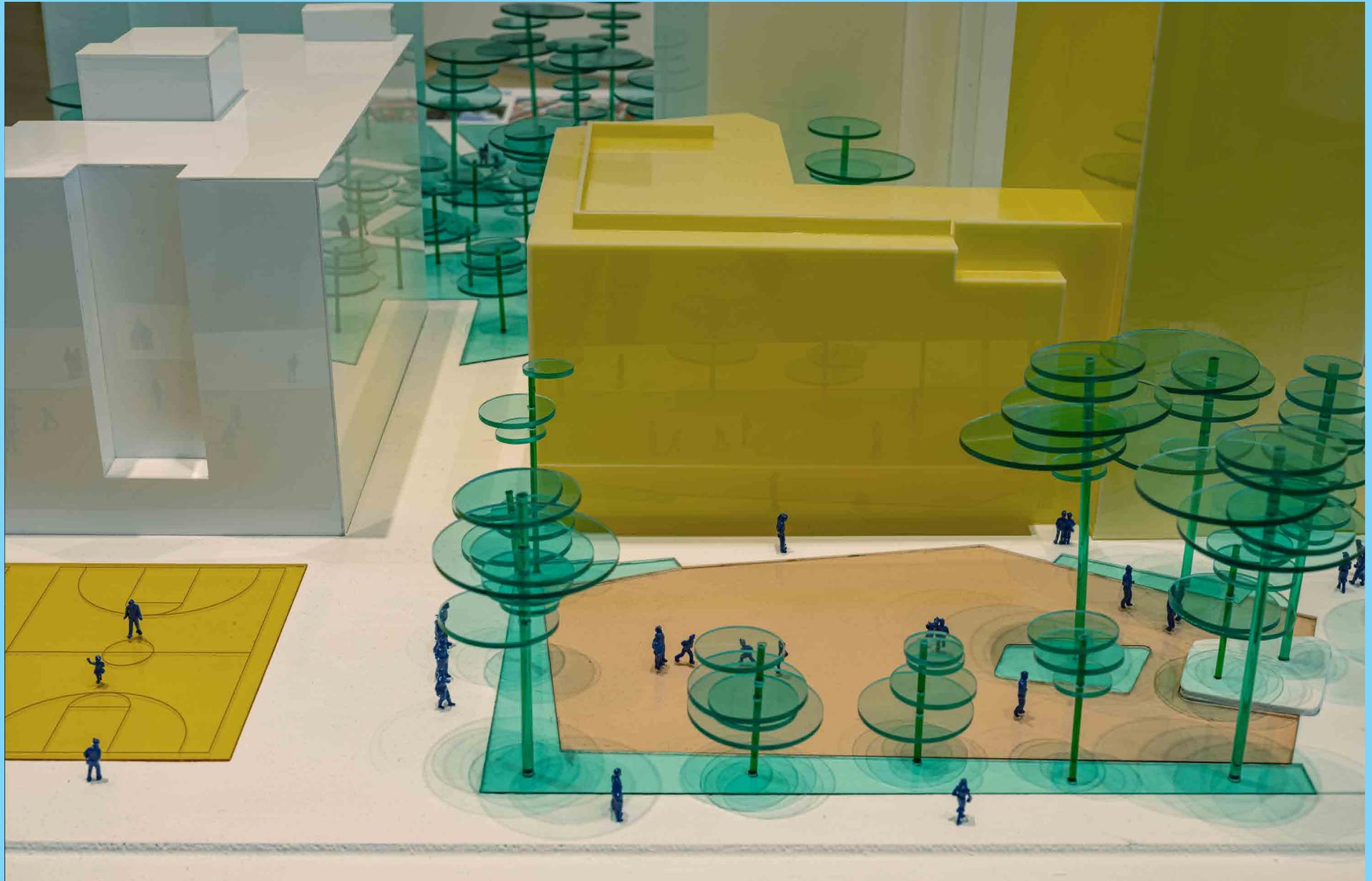
The children's playground at Borinquen Plaza in Williamsburg, 1976.



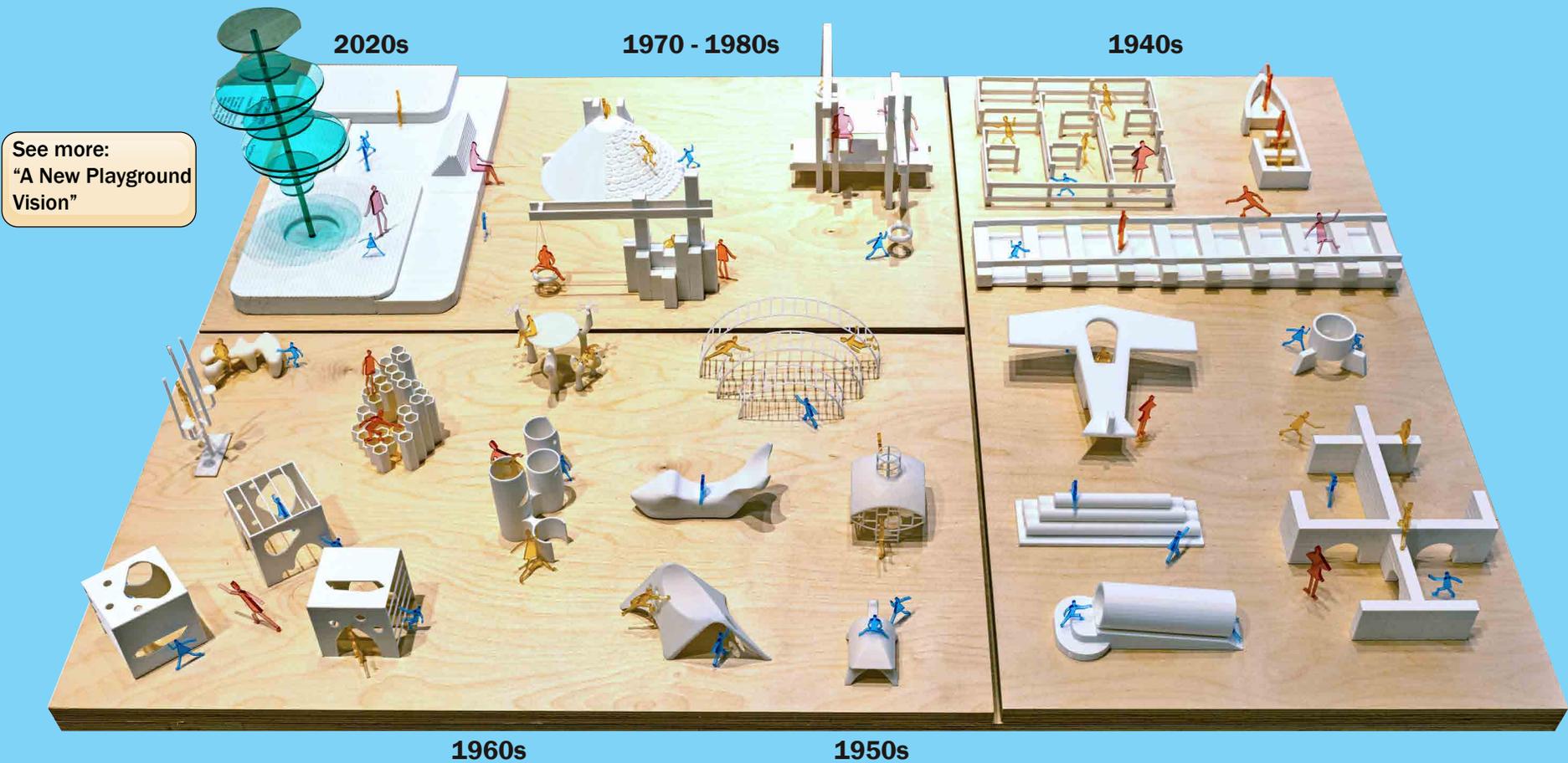
An experimental playground at Cypress Hills Houses, Brooklyn, 1967.

“Every one of the public housing projects has play facilities within the project and additional playgrounds operated by the Park Department.”

— Robert Moses Letter, September, 1948



View of the basketball court, and the playground maintained under the NYC Park department at Washington Houses.

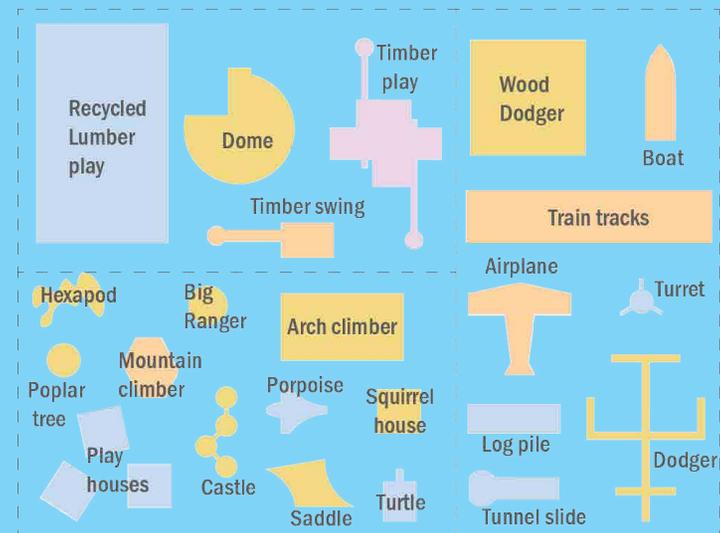
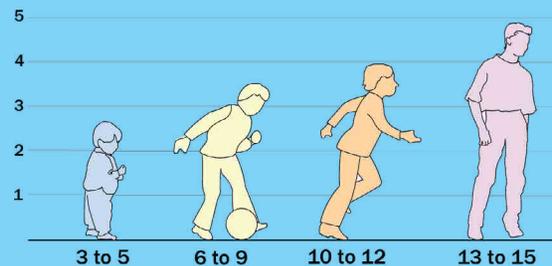


NYCHA Playground Equipment

NYCHA's experimental equipment went through periods that took changing attitudes of children's age, needs, and types of play into account. The variety of forms and landscape-integrated equipment provide for specificity of play and activity for all ages and needs. The model key and scale figure colors indicate this variety.

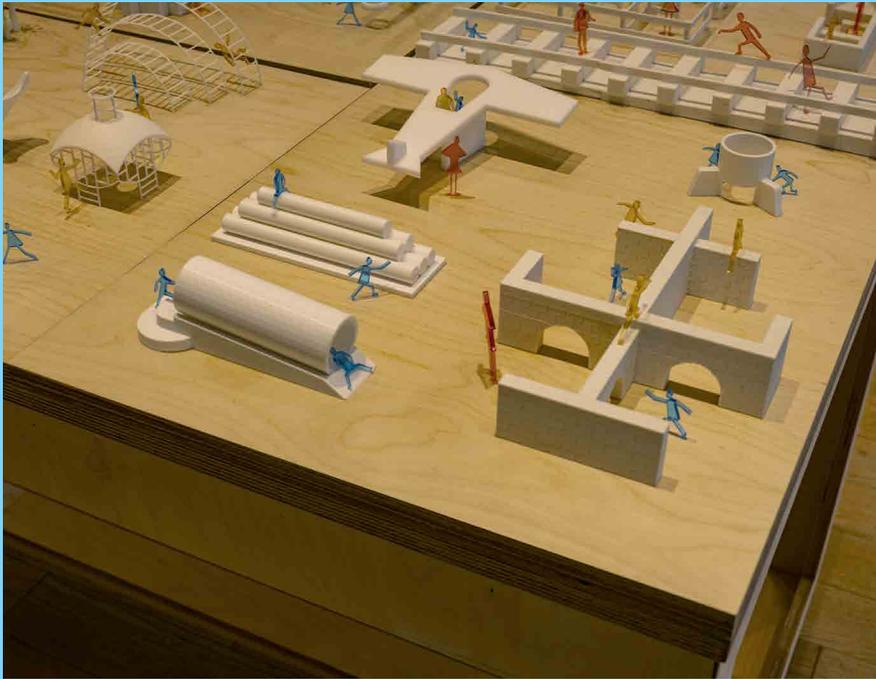
60% EQUIPMENT for elementary school children

CLIMBING most popular activity

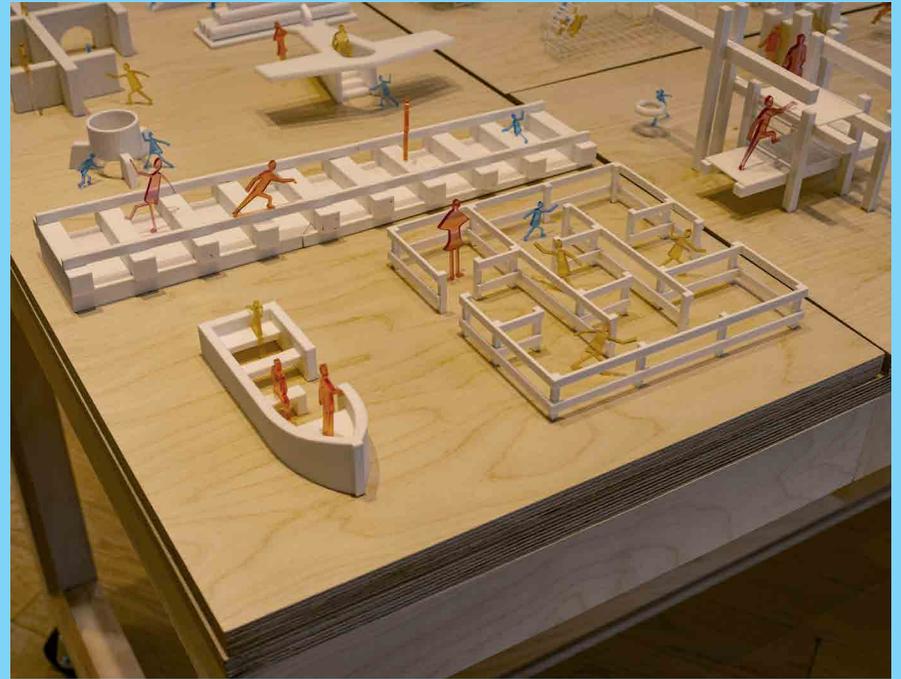


Playground Equipment Models

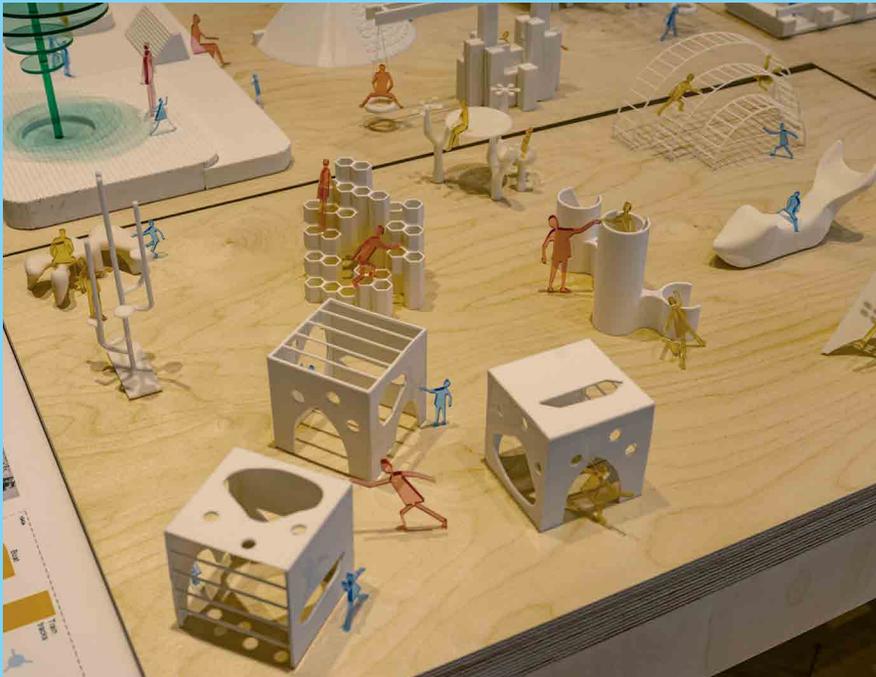
1940s



1940s



1950-1960s



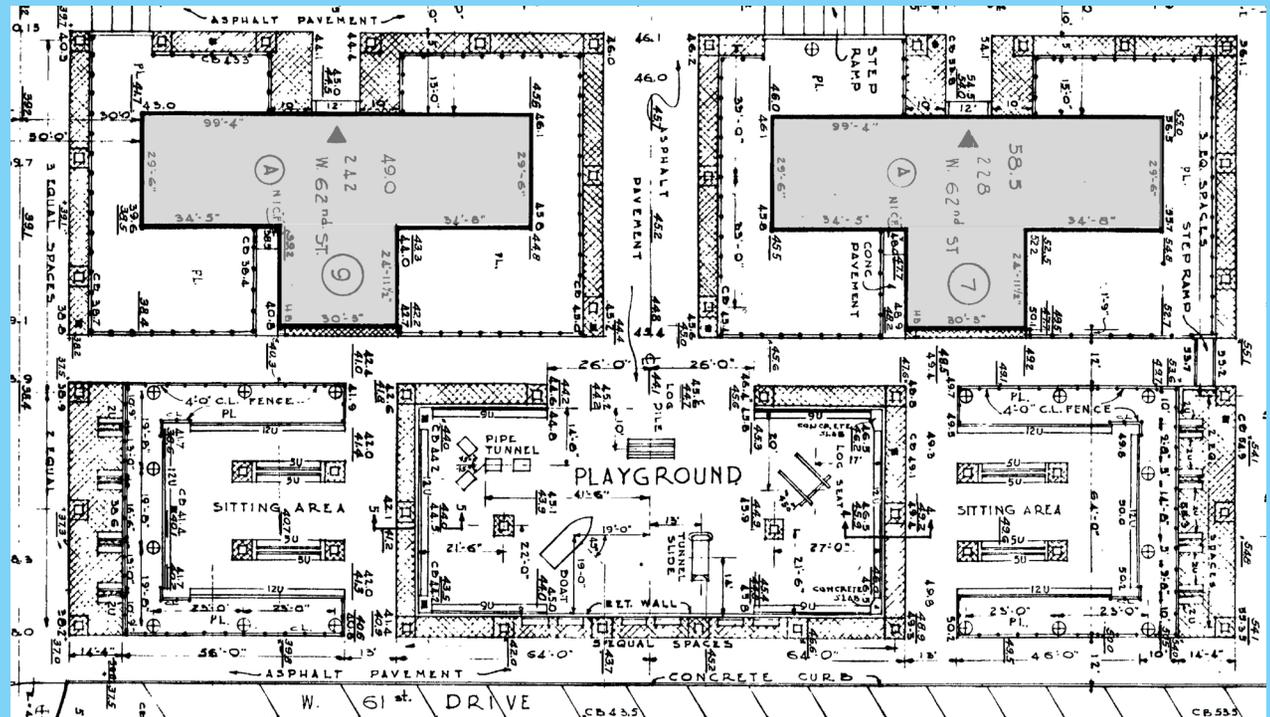
1970s - Contemporary



Play for Childrens' Needs

Early equipment designs focused on younger children, supporting the family-oriented building and open space planning. Free play and imagination were the focus of the equipment, and the equipment was often built by residents.

The equipment does not move; the children do the moving. Sculptures mostly stimulated the exploration of new activities. Through the self-directed unsupervised fun of imaginative and physical activity children increase their proficiency in hand and eye coordination, balance and muscular development.



One of the Amsterdam Houses playgrounds featured equipments such as the boat and pipe tunnels, 1946.



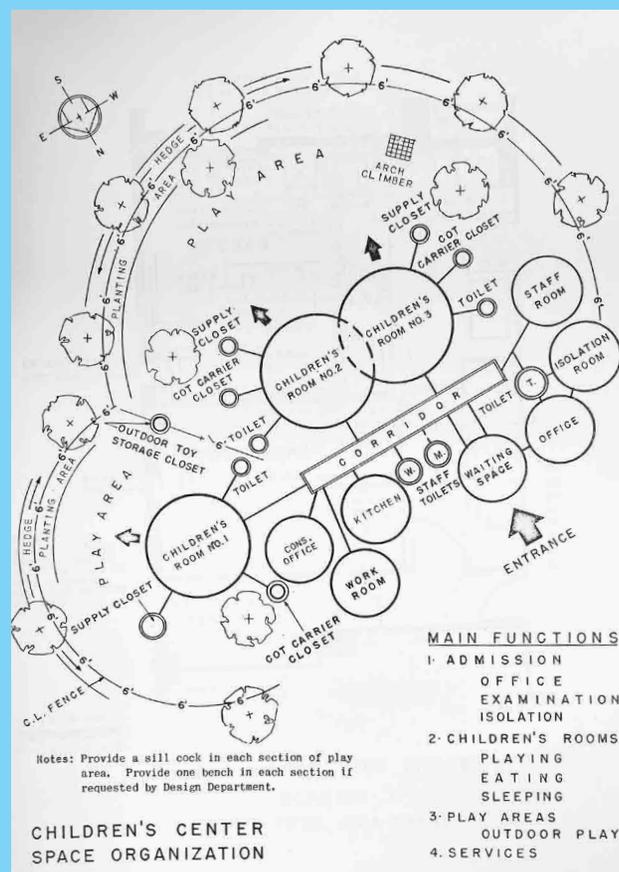
Fort Greene Houses' playground with the "theater" in the background, 1945.



View of the Amsterdam Houses' park areas and children's playgrounds, 1949.

Design by Age

NYCHA design took into account child development. Most campuses had enclosed, limited-access outdoor play areas attached to early childhood centers with equipment for the youngest children under adult supervision. Rows of benches near playgrounds and building entries were for adult comfort and helped to provide the “eyes on the street.” Active recreation was also designed around age. Ballcourts run by NYCHA or the Parks Department were better for the older children; active playgrounds were for the children beyond preschool.



Children's center space organization, 1959.



Playground and sitting area at East River Houses, 1947.



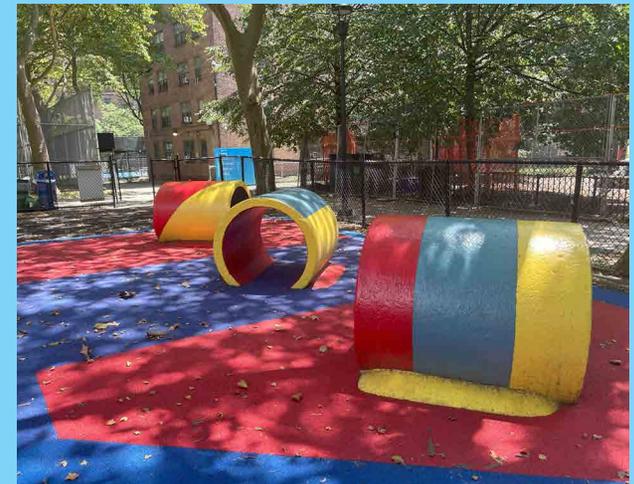
The kindergarten at East River Houses overlooking the playground.

Experimental Playgrounds

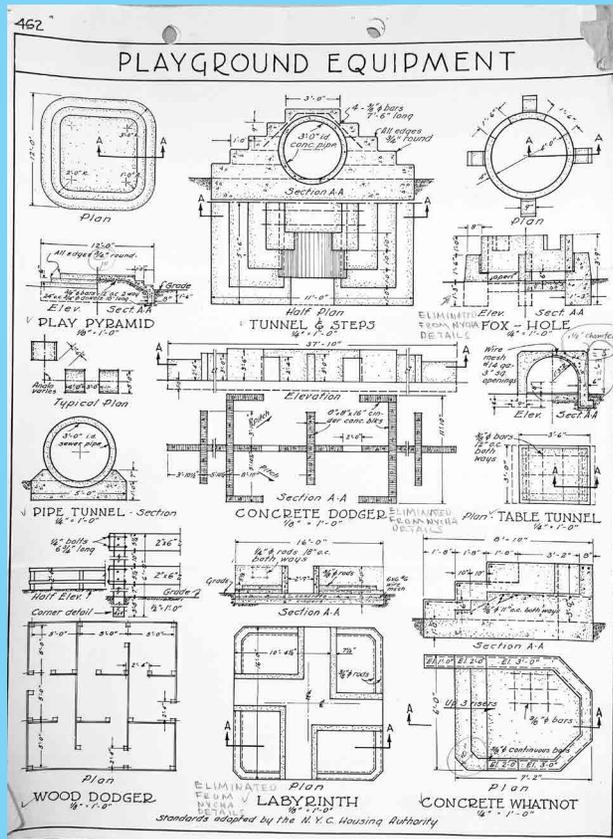
NYCHA administrators creatively designed creative low-cost, durable equipment to stimulate climbing and exploration for younger children. For instance, “the attraction of partially demolished buildings to children” led to enterprising NYCHA staff building “dodgers” that the children “soon swarmed all over” at Red Hook Houses (1939). The program received national attention, and many variations sprouted on NYCHA campuses.



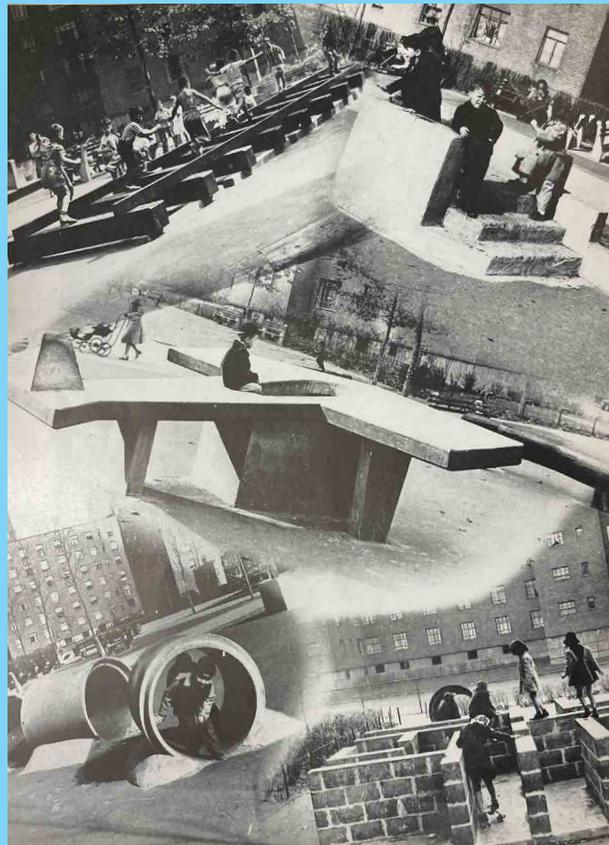
The Dodger allowed for a wide range of play activities.



The Pipe Tunnels now restored at Van Dyke Houses.



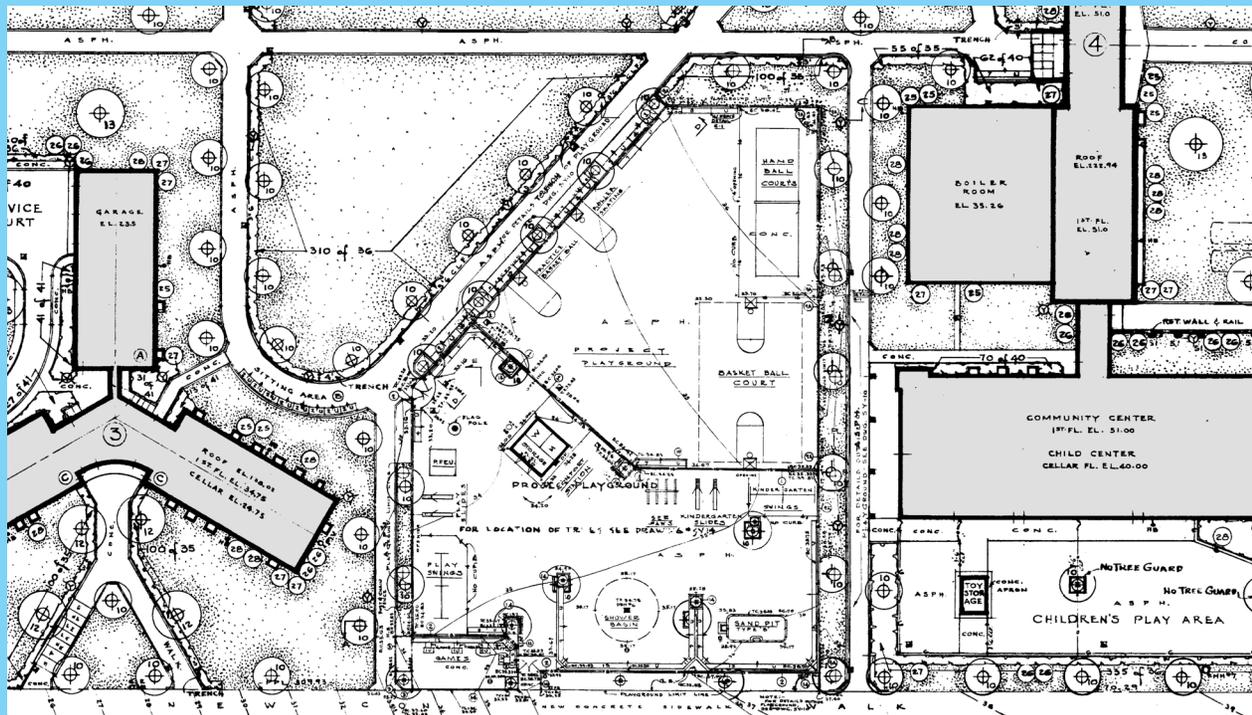
Playground equipment designs from mid-late 1940s.



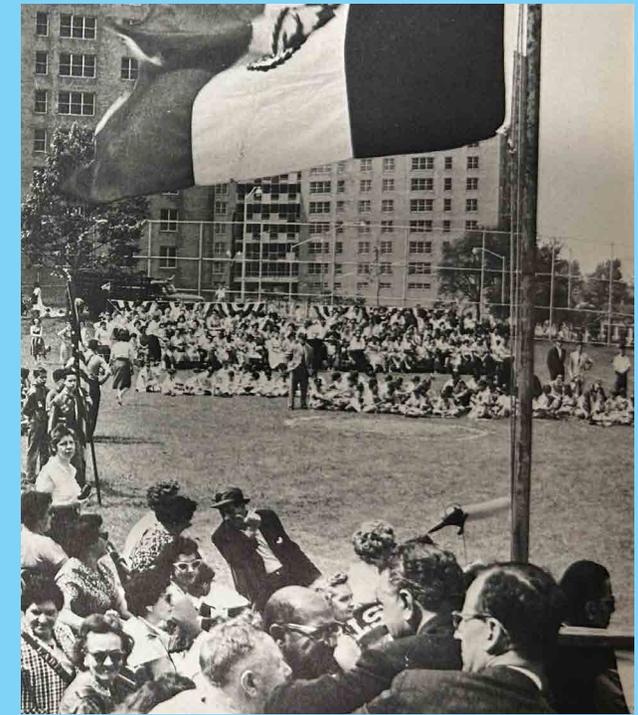
NYCHA designed equipment from the 1940s.



Playground at the J.W. Johnson Houses in 1949.



Partial plan of Caste Hill Houses featuring the playground, 1957.



The new baseball grounds at Castle Hill, 1960.

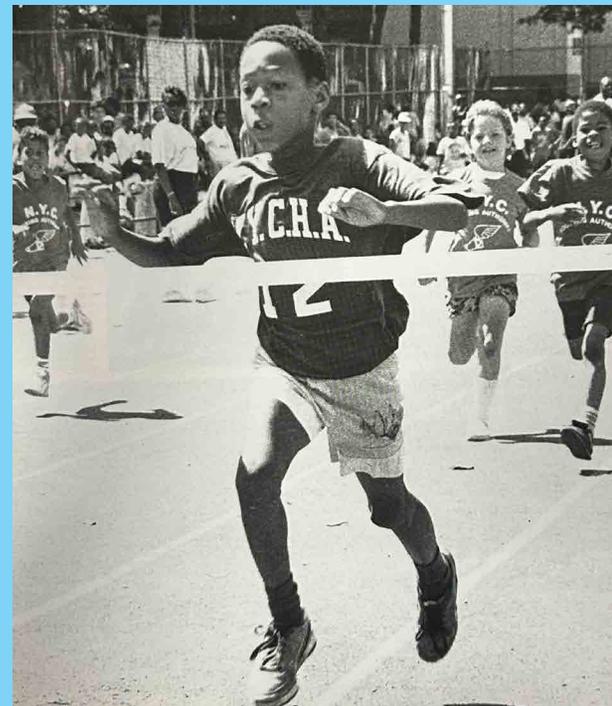
Fields and Sports

As the number of kids multiplied thanks to the baby boom and vandalism increased, NYCHA leaders shifted focus to active recreation to “save in repair costs by giving youngsters places to use up their energy in play rather than in mischief in the buildings and on the grounds.”

Later planning integrated sports fields and courts, specific activities supported by resident engagement programs. This structured play allowed the open space to cater to the older children. These courts often became locations of pride for the residents, and later contested spaces between the residents and the surrounding neighborhood.



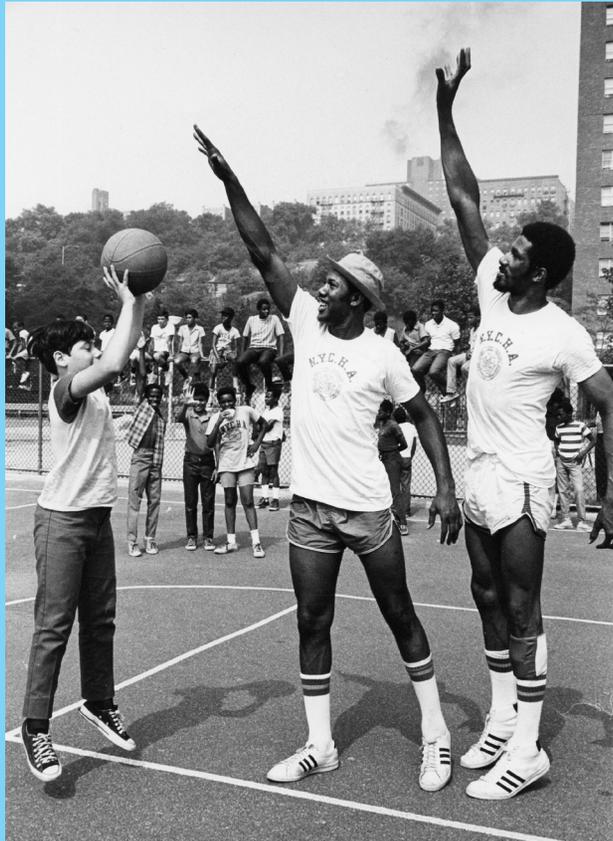
NYCHA tenant program track and field event, 1975.



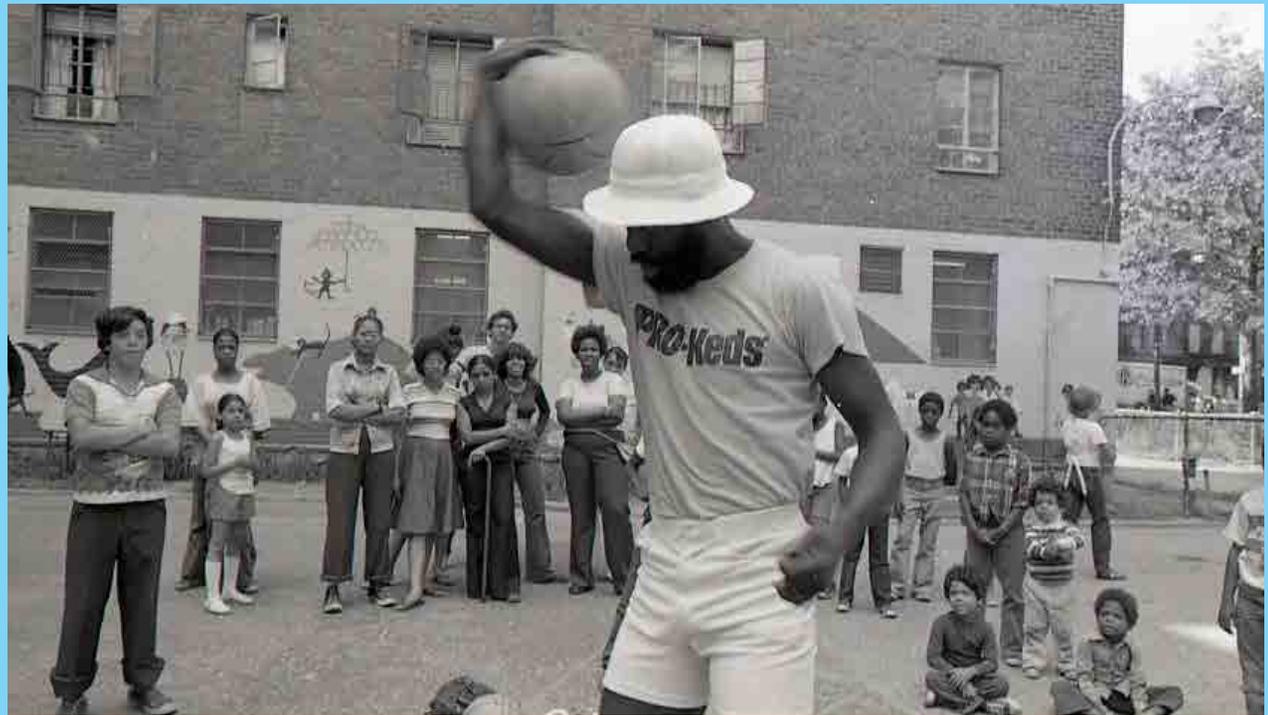
NYCHA track and field, 1980s.

Ball Courts

Active basketball and handball courts were initially rare elements of NYCHA campuses, emphasizing quiet apartment living. However, planner Robert Moses was not pleased and fought to co-locate new city parks near NYCHA projects and sometimes inside them. By 1948, he could claim, "Every one of the public housing projects has play facilities within the project and additional playgrounds operated by the Park Department." NYCHA administrators in the 1950s and 1960s also increased the number of ballcourts in response to growing youth numbers.



Basketball clinic for NYCHA residents, 1970.



Basketball clinic for NYCHA residents; part of tenant summer program at Lilian Wald Houses, 1977.

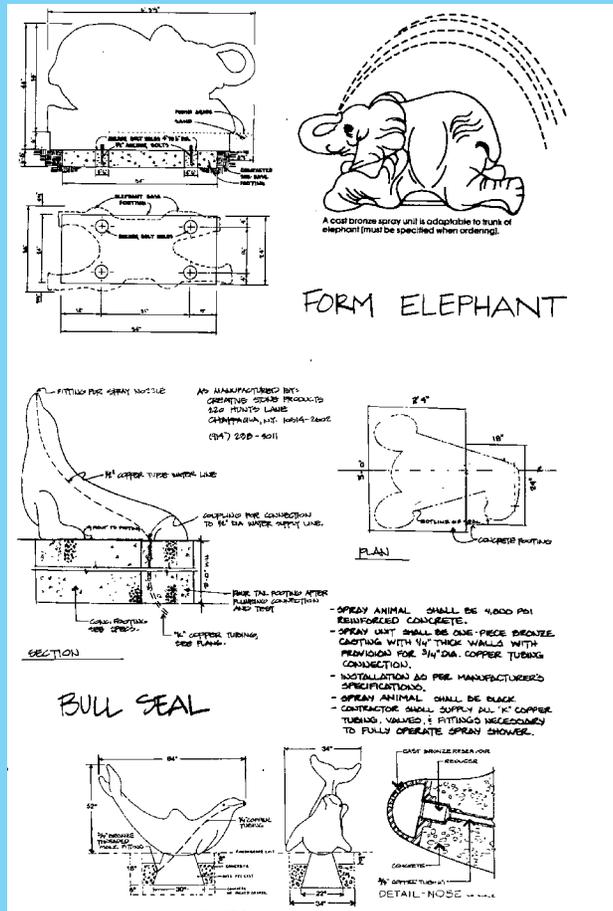


Teenagers play shuffleboard at East River Houses, while parents and children watch, 1943.

Waterworks

Spray fountains have been part of NYCHA landscapes since First Houses opened in 1936. Fountains at First Houses and later developments compensated for the limited number of public pools in crowded neighborhoods and the need for summer relief and fun for children.

Some of the most ambitious landscape redesigns of the 1960s, like that at Riis Houses, integrated waterworks into progressive landscape designs.



Various NYCHA spraying sculptures, 1991.



Kids enjoying the spraying seals at Mariner's Harbor Houses on Staten Island, 1975.



A Congressional tour watch kids at Riis Houses cool off during summer, 1949.



At the Jacob Riis Houses, an amphitheater doubles as a spray pool and waterfalls.



Bay View Houses splash playground. From the NYCHA Annual Report 1964.

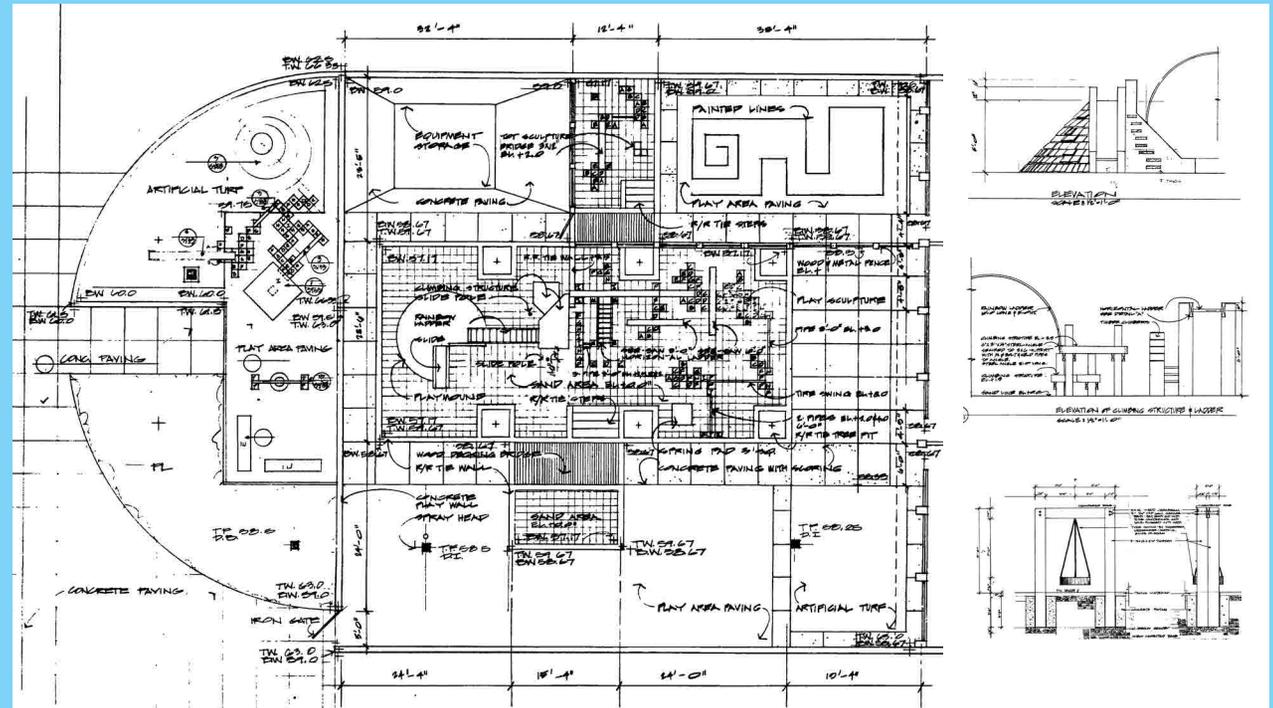
Planning New Playgrounds

In the 1960s the “Adventure Playground” updated earlier playground layouts. Designed with natural materials to integrate the play area into the land itself, these playgrounds were muted in tone and blended structural building materials, such as cast concrete, with natural materials, such as ropes and large-size timbers.

By 1961, NYCHA claimed that “the playgrounds range from tot-lots with monkey bars and similar facilities to ball fields for teenagers.”



Adventure Playground at Riis Plaza, NY, 1966.



The courtyard play area at Twin Parks West.



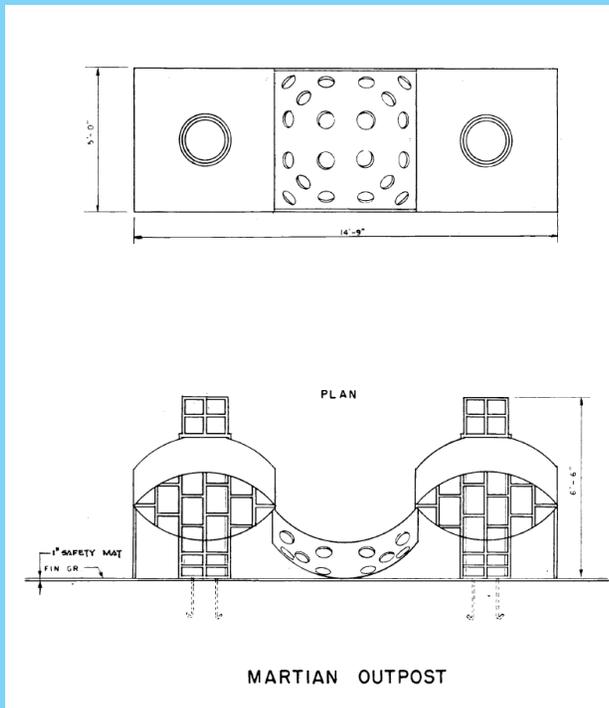
Adventure Playground at Twin Parks West, NY, 1973.



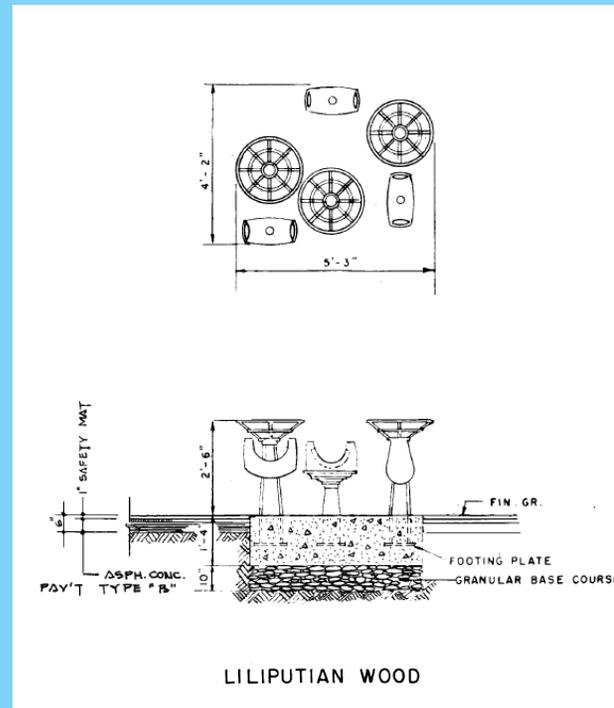
Children playing in the space age playground at Forest Hills Co-op, 1975.



Kids use the "castle" at LaGuardia Houses, 1967.



MARTIAN OUTPOST



LILIPUTIAN WOOD

Examples of shell-ters, "trees" and "rocks" equipment.

The 1964 New York World's Fair introduced new ways of arranging activities within playgrounds. Called the "Playground of Tomorrow", they illustrated how play areas could be "age-graded" with separate spots for pre-schoolers and lower and upper elementary age groups. These playgrounds utilized equipment in different ways according to area, age, or the special needs voiced by playground administrators.

By the 1970s, as playground safety rose in importance, many playgrounds were retrofitted to eliminate hazardous conditions such as hard surfaces and the potential for long falls.

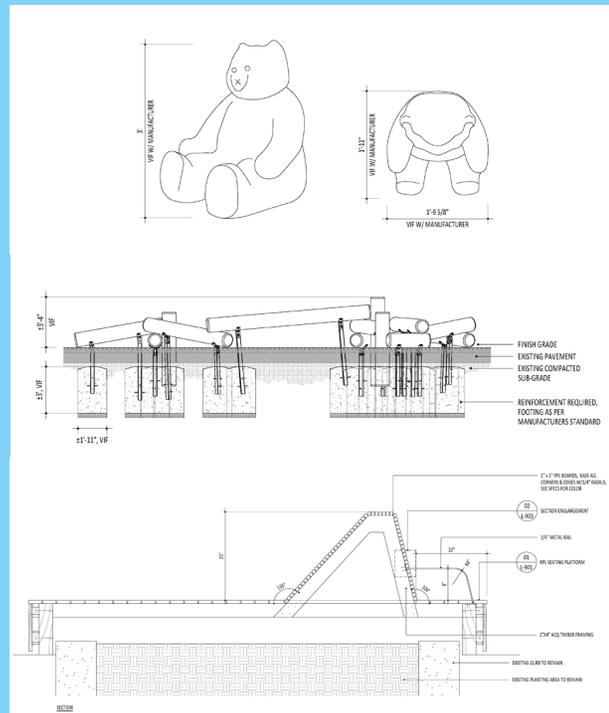
Current planning has focused on a more complete integration of ages and people with the equipment used. Play and exercise spaces for the neuro-diverse and the aged have further diversified the options for a varied population. This has had the positive effect of making the playgrounds places of interaction of all ages.



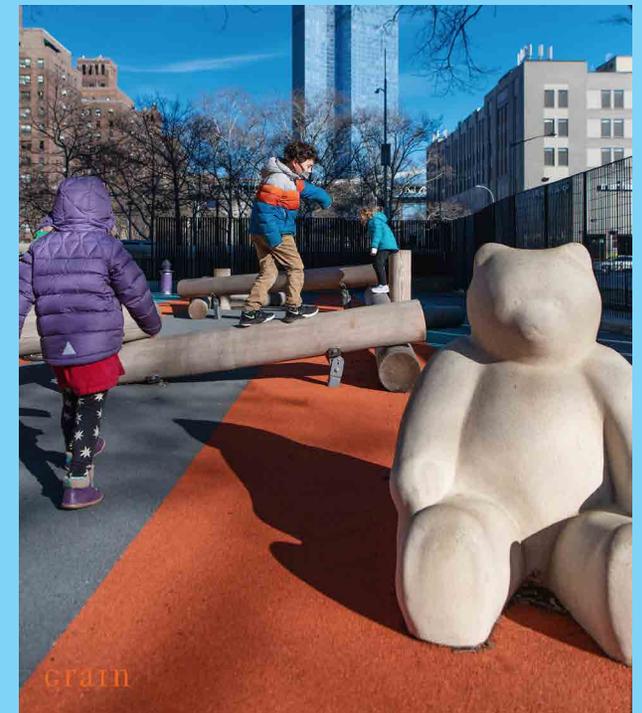
Smith Houses playground, 2023.



Sprout, a new neurodiverse playscape, 2024.



Various equipment of the Smith Houses playground.



NYCHA Today

Many NYCHA residents still gather and play outdoors, and their families benefit from shade and lower temperatures, but the superblocks are not as well utilized as they were decades ago. This decline in activity undermines the tower-in-the-park concept that devoted so much valuable urban land to open space. Rising crime, air conditioning, electronic entertainment, and the declining conditions at many NYCHA playgrounds have diminished liveliness. Landscape maintenance has taken a back seat because billions in urgent building repairs are required to maintain apartment habitability. Two sets of contemporary photographs highlight the experiential aspects of NYCHA open space conditions.



Helen Marshall, Resident Photographer.



Gertrude Livingston, Resident Photographer.



Asa Taft, Resident Photographer.



Susana Ortiz, Resident Photographer.



Jared Wellington, Resident Photographer.
My cousins in the projects. There are three parks near my building.



Margaret Wells, Resident Photographer.
Remember when the ball field was a dust bowl? Now paved, kids love to play basketball.



Jared Wellington, Resident Photographer.
We roam around this spontaneous block sticking together as brothers. Yet we are cousins.

“Everybody sees the word ‘project’ in a different way. I see it as a place where I live. I don’t see it in a negative aspect.”
— Znya Mourning

Project Lives (2013)

These photographs, selected from among those taken by NYCHA residents as part of Project Lives between 2010 and 2013, capture the complex experience. Children may still find brightness and joy in a fountain or ballcourt, but NYCHA landscapes deliver less beauty, warmth, and security to residents and the community than initially hoped.

LaGuardia Community College Student Photos (2025)

These contemporary photos were taken by LaGuardia Commercial Photography students as part of coursework under the direction of Professor Maureen Drennan and Dr. Stephen Petrus, historian and director of Public History Programs for the LaGuardia and Wagner Archives.



Photo exhibition at LaGuardia Community College (2025).

Queensbridge Houses

Christian Jerez, Student Photographer.



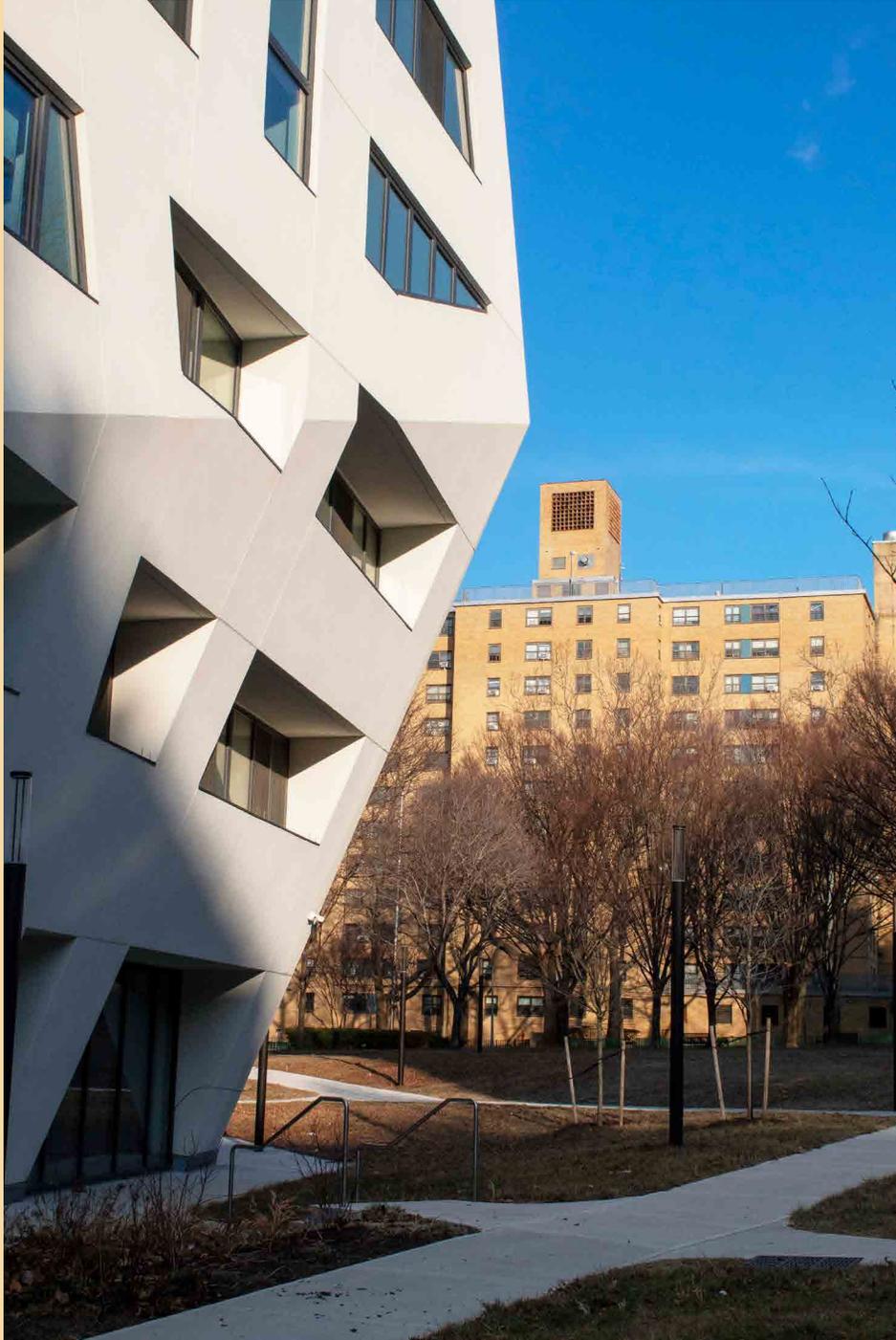


Castle Hill Houses

Yenny Cristal Ramos Disla, Student Photographer.

Sumner Houses

Christian Jerez, Student Photographer.





Fulton Houses

Ashley Hope Romines, Student Photographer.

Redesign for Community

Over the past two decades, NYCHA leaders and designers have worked with residents, community activists, and elected officials to reimagine and enhance open space. Today, the emphasis is on resident engagement, the arts, resiliency, and programming for renewed outdoor activity. With sufficient funding, NYCHA open spaces can again become community assets.

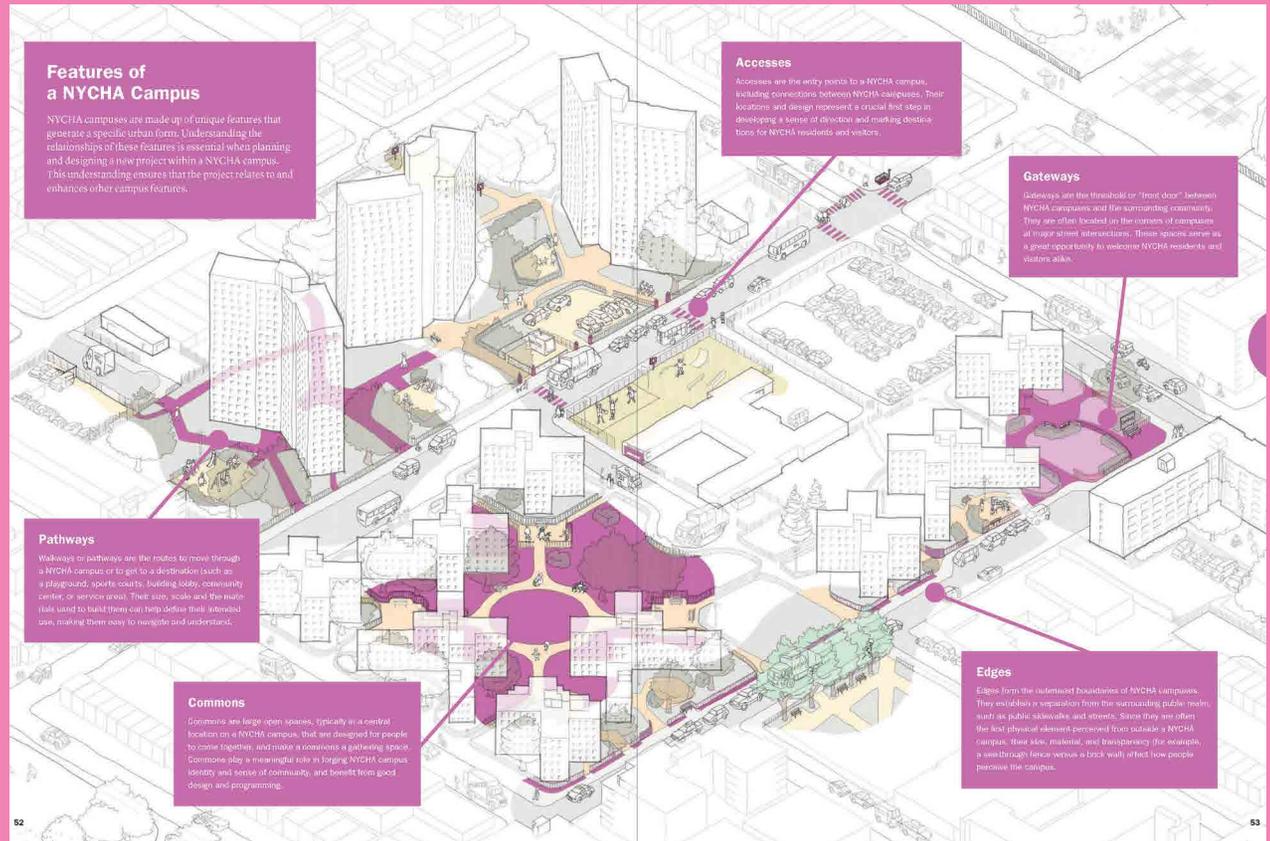


Resident engage with a model for an improved space at Wald Houses in 2017.

Resident-inspired Design

NYCHA's Connected Communities Program, established as an initiative in 2018, responds to the widespread feeling that current NYCHA landscapes should provide meaningful social and recreational opportunities for residents and NYCHA neighbors.

The *Connected Communities Guidebook*, grounded in urban design analysis of current conditions and best practices, emphasizes robust resident and staff engagement as the cornerstone of future renovations. This resident-oriented process is a stark contrast to decades of top-down NYCHA planning.



Features of a NYCHA Campus, from “Connected Communities Guidebook”.

Learn more about this initiative at:
[“Connected Communities Guidebook”](#)

NYCHA residents and the surrounding community must have an active role in shaping the environment in which they live. Community engagement is a trust-building exercise, and projects that promote an inclusive participatory design are more likely to succeed.

— Connected Communities Guidebook, NYCHA, 2020

NYCHA Open Space Master Plan

Residents at Pomonok Houses collaborated with planners on a pilot project reflecting the Guidebook principles. The Guidebook also provided guidelines for future infill buildings that could enhance open space conditions.

Design professionals Grain Collective and Nancy Owens Studio integrated many Connected Communities principles into the NYCHA Open Space Master Plan (2021), a systemwide analysis of challenges and opportunities. Implementing the Master Plan at scale would require a substantial improvement in NYCHA's financial situation but would have many benefits for residents and the city.



Resident sharing ideas at Family Day.



Pomonok Houses, the pilot project for Connected Communities Initiative.



Workshop at Pomonok Houses.



Basketball court in Pomonok Houses, as realized.



Design scheme after resident engagement meetings for an improved space at Wald Houses in 2021.

“Opening the Edge” with Design Trust for Public Space

The Opening the Edge project reflects a spirit of community engagement aligned with Connected Communities. Many residents and designers believe that using steel fencing to protect lawns and define property lines creates unnecessary barriers between residents and open spaces, adding to the isolation of NYCHA communities.

The project, launched in 2014 in partnership with the Urban Design Trust, reimagines a fenced-off grassy area at NYCHA’s Lillian Wald Houses on the Lower East Side. The final design, developed in close partnership with residents over many years, replaces the fencing with accessible pathways, open seating, a sloped performance platform, and improved lighting. Construction is set to begin in 2025.



“Lighting the Edge” installation.



2024 Groundbreaking boards.

PACT Landscapes

NYCHA developments, built at remarkable speed decades ago, collectively need tens of billions of dollars in renovation today. Lacking sufficient public subsidies, NYCHA is working to rehabilitate and manage approximately one-third of its portfolio through partnerships with private developers as part of what is known as PACT (Permanent Affordability Commitment Together).

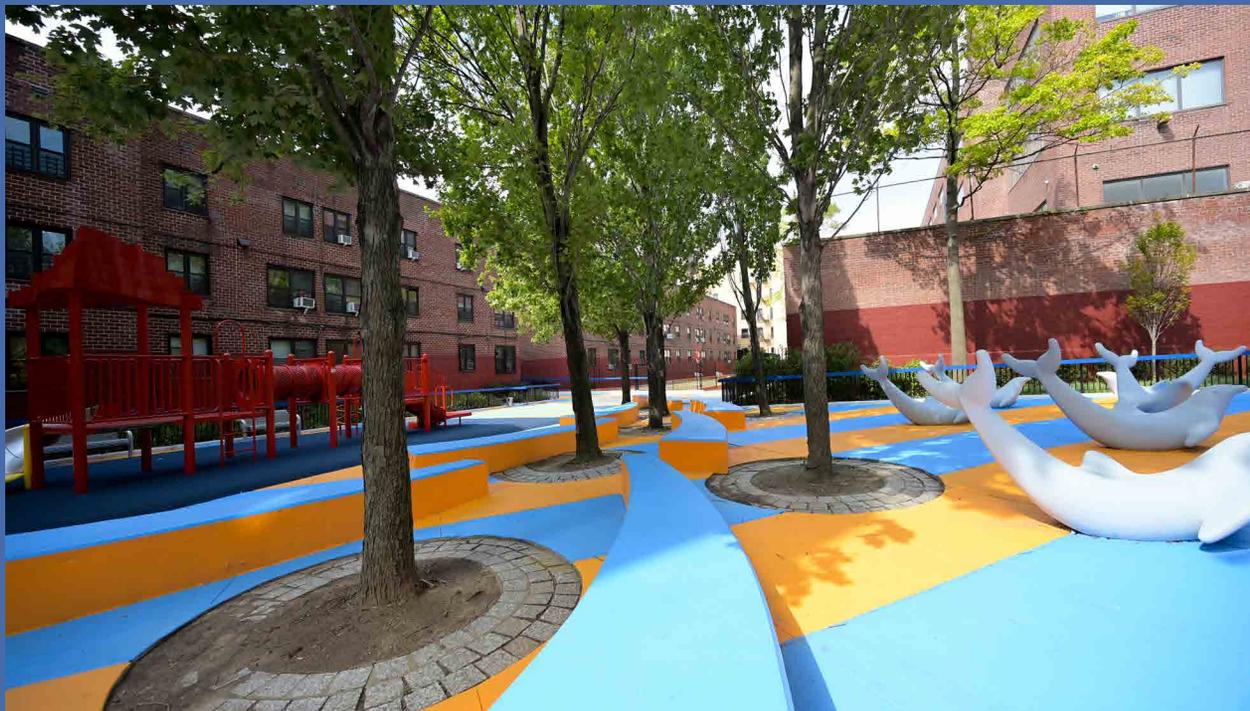
PACT shifts NYCHA complexes from Section 9 (traditional public housing) to the Section 8 (voucher) program. Today, 138 NYCHA developments representing 37,000 apartments are in pre-development, under construction, or have completed construction, with the long-term aim of converting 62,000 units.



RAD renovation of a building entry at Williamsburg Houses.



View of the neglected playground at the Betances Houses.



After renovation of the playground at the Betances Houses.

Landscape improvements at PACT sites complement extensive interior and facade modernization. Through extensive outreach and engagement, residents of PACT developments have provided their preferences for new play equipment and other outdoor upgrades.

Completed PACT projects include modern playgrounds, new benches, spray fountains, mended walkways and fences, extensive planted ground cover, and tree trimming.

NYCHA has undergone its most extensive open space renovation in decades through PACT.

**Public spaces
across 35 sites
were restored.**

Williamsburg Houses | built 1938



Renovation of playgrounds at Williamsburg Houses.



Ocean Bay Houses | built 1953



PACT renovation at Ocean Bay Houses.



See case study:
"Ocean Bay Houses"

Betances Houses | built 1973



New mural and sitting area at Betances Houses.



Resiliency

Damage from Superstorm Sandy led to over \$3 billion in FEMA funding, enabling retrofitting at thirty-five developments. The interventions impacting NYCHA open spaces are new freestanding buildings to protect equipment, surge protection for entries, and renovated playgrounds. NYCHA's hundreds of acres of unpaved spaces offer creative opportunities for future citywide resiliency measures.



New electrical room, Redfern Houses.



Community space created within and adjacent to the new boiler plant in Coney Island Houses.

More than 13,000 floodproofing components installed across 33 sites.



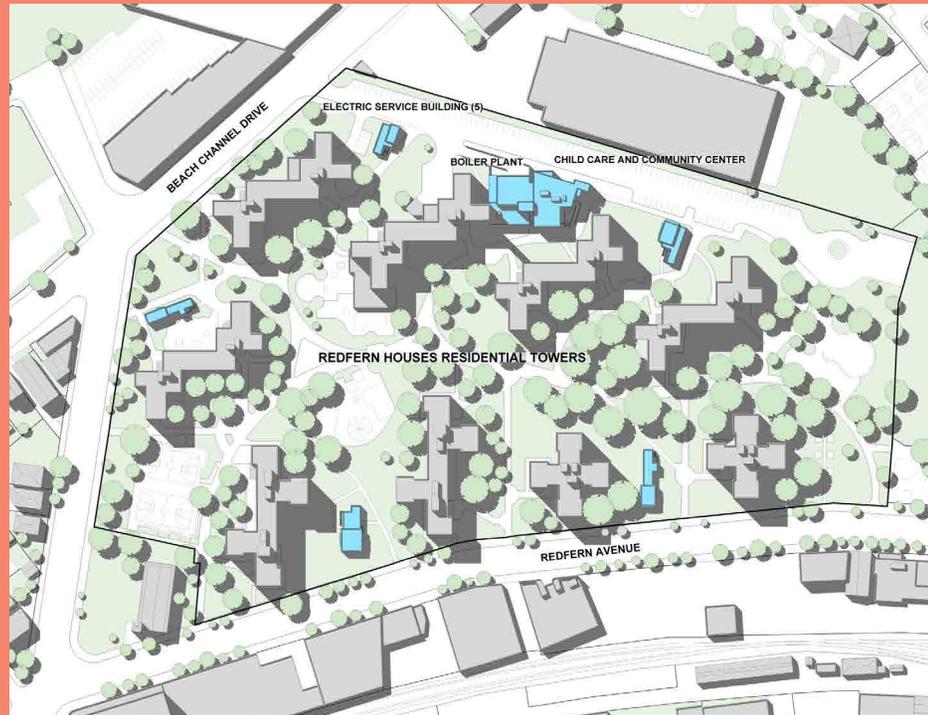
One of the central spaces at the Ocean Bay Houses. Part of the PACT work included a revamping of courts, playgrounds, new farming boxes, and flood proofed

Resiliency Projects

Strategies such as floodable basketball courts, subsurface retention ponds, porous concrete pavement, and permeable rain gardens could reduce flooding on NYCHA developments and slow the flow of rain into surrounding neighborhoods, the overburdened storm sewers, and the water treatment system.

Such strategies aim to not only repair the damage, but strengthen NYCHA grounds and buildings to withstand the impact of future storms.

The Redfern Sandy Recovery and Resiliency project includes renovation of playgrounds and lighting, flood protection, and a new resilient building that houses a combined community and childcare center, as well as full back-up emergency power generators.



Sandy Recovery Buildings, Redfern Houses.



Rain gardens at Williamsburg Houses.



Combined Child Care Center and Boiler Plant, Redfern Houses.

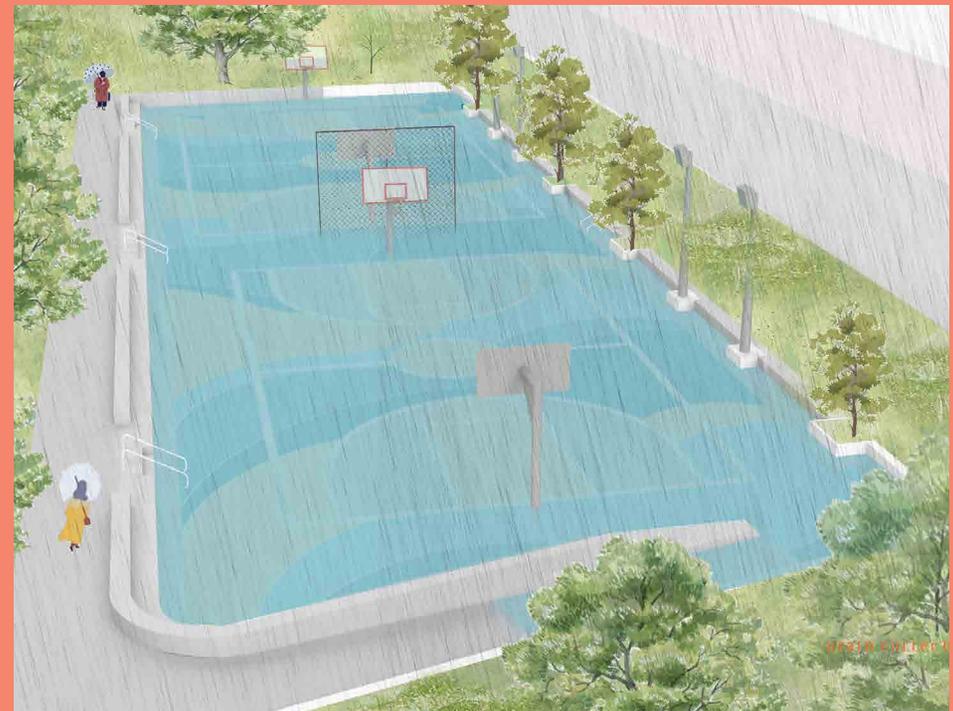
Cloudburst

The goal of Cloudburst planning is to control neighborhood flooding for rain events ranging from a 10-year storm to everyday rain events through the use of well-designed outdoor spaces and infrastructure.

The initiative pilot project is South Jamaica Houses, which includes eight city blocks in South Jamaica, Queens and is home to 2,600 residents. This project will maximize stormwater capture for up to 2.3 inches of rainfall per hour. Aside from flood mitigation, this pilot shows how cloudburst infrastructure can offer many co-benefits to communities.



Residents place stickers on proposals during a workshop.



Rendering of the South Jamaica Houses basketball court, before and after a cloudburst event.

A New Playground Vision

The hundreds of playgrounds still run directly by NYCHA are a management challenge. NYCHA administrators have ordered large quantities of replacement equipment over the past decades, but much of this portfolio is standardized metal and plastic play equipment with rubber mats below. Many playgrounds are underutilized today due to maintenance issues, an aging resident population, public safety concerns, and isolation from surrounding neighborhoods.



Aerial view of the Smith Houses playground.

Grain Collective

Hurricane Sandy damage and FEMA funding were opportunities to introduce creative design and developmental milestones for children at a few NYCHA playgrounds. Designers at Grain Collective helped create “a new generation of NYCHA playgrounds, free from the ubiquitous metal structures and black matting of the past.” The design language of the playgrounds brightens landscapes through ground murals and innovative climbing and play structures.



Seating Platform at Smith Houses.



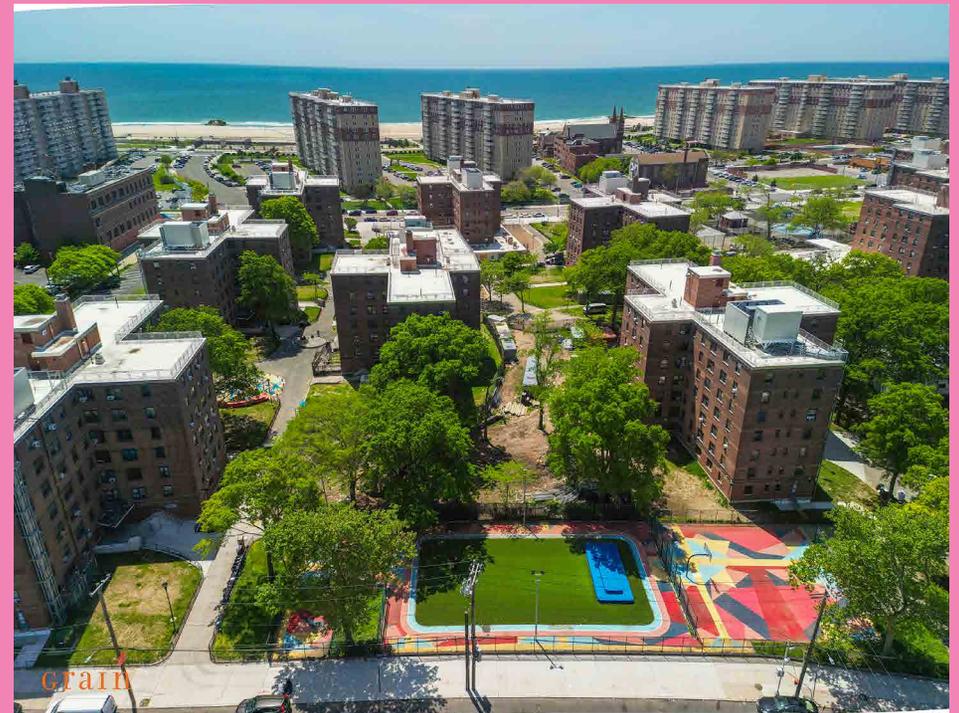
Design charette with children re-envisioning the Smith Houses playground.



The renovated playground at Smith Houses.



Playscape at Carleton Manor.



Aerial view of the Hammel Houses playground.



Playground in Redfern Houses.

Basketball Courts

Basketball court renovations have been a bright spot in NYCHA design for decades. NYCHA residents have benefited from many colorful and substantial renovations, including renovated surfaces, colorful sports themes, lighting, and amphitheater seating.

10% of NYCHA open spaces are mostly playgrounds & sports courts.



Basketball court renovation in Castle Hill Houses.



Basketball court renovation in King Towers Houses.



Hammel Houses court and playground.



Adult Equipment

NYCHA has introduced outdoor workout space for its growing number of adults, partly to divert them from working out on equipment designed for children. The Carver Houses Fitness Zone is NYCHA's first-ever outdoor fitness area, created in partnership with The Trust for Public Land (TPL) and funded by Mount Sinai Hospital, which provides high-quality exercise equipment.

Outdoor fitness area at Carver Houses.

Public Safety through Community Design

Can open space redesign improve public safety at NYCHA developments? This question animates the Mayor's Action Plan for Neighborhood Safety (MAP), a neighborhood-based initiative of the Mayor's Office of Criminal Justice. MAP prioritizes creative, non-traditional approaches to increase public safety at fifteen NYCHA developments.

MAP brings together NYCHA residents, staff, City agencies, and non-profit partners to identify public safety concerns, create action plans, and implement collaborative solutions. According to Danielle Brutus from the Center for Justice Innovation, a MAP project partner, "each of these safety interventions was created by residents for residents as innovative solutions to addressing community safety."



Marcy Houses' ground mural and it's painters.



Wagner Houses' mural.

Patterson Houses

For instance, over one hundred ideas submitted by residents for open space projects in the Patterson Houses became the basis for the projects developed in real life. New playgrounds, gardens, and mural projects at Patterson reflect the results.

**100 ideas
submitted for
new open spaces
in Patterson.**



Residents working at the composting station.



Children event Action Plan 2.0

“Everyone should have access to quality resources and amenities in their community, and that includes places to play and relax outdoors, especially for our younger neighbors,”

— Jessica Katz, former Chief Housing Officer,
City of New York

See case study:
“Patterson Houses”



Inauguration of the new gazebo at Serenity Gardens.



**UNITY GARDEN
EXISTING CONDITION**



Existing conditions and residents' re-envision of one open space at Polo Grounds.



Children engagement event at Polo Grounds.

Polo Grounds Houses

A similar resident-based process has yielded improvements at Polo Grounds Houses and other developments. It was rooted in community participation. Through workshops and discussions, residents shared their stories, experiences, and visions to help create a space that reflects their unique needs. Their insights shaped the final designs, ensuring the playscape genuinely represents the community's creativity and its collective voice



Washington Houses - Children of all abilities can enjoy playground features such as a whale-decorated water table, sprinkler pad, and sensory play devices.



Polo Grounds - Sprout, a new neurodiverse playscape.

“Sprout highlights the importance of neurodiversity and equitable play spaces in urban planning, putting the community at the forefront of design,” - Jose Torres, Center for Court Innovation

Farming NYCHA

NYCHA farms have grown, harvested, and distributed hundreds of thousands of pounds of produce to thousands of residents, many of whom reside in food deserts with limited food options.

There are currently seven farms on NYCHA grounds focusing on healthy food access and nurturing a youthful workforce.

6 acres of NYCHA farms produced 176,000 pounds of produce in 3 years.



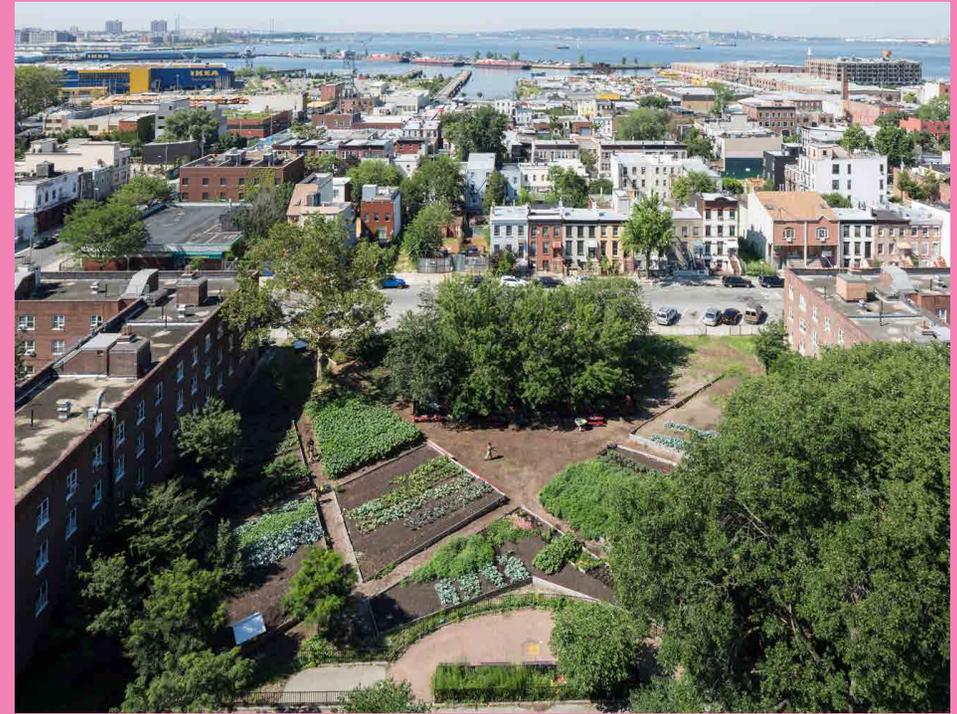
Farm at Bay View Houses.

Urban Farms at NYCHA

The inaugural farm at Red Hook Houses was launched in 2013. Spanning just a little over an acre, each year it harvests over 5,000 pounds of produce. It was built through a collaboration with Green City Force, the Mayor's Office, and the NYC Housing Authority. Residents of public housing take home produce for free by caring for the farm or by bringing in food scraps for us to compost.



Red Hook farms.



Aerial photo of the first ever NYCHA farm in Red Hook Houses.

The Roxanne Reid Memorial Garden was dedicated to the late Tenant Association President who passed away from Covid-19 in 2020 before the garden could be fully built. Ms. Reid was an avid supporter and stronghold for the Castle Hill Community. The garden was built with the support of the Tenant Association, community land stewards, and Castle Hill residents.

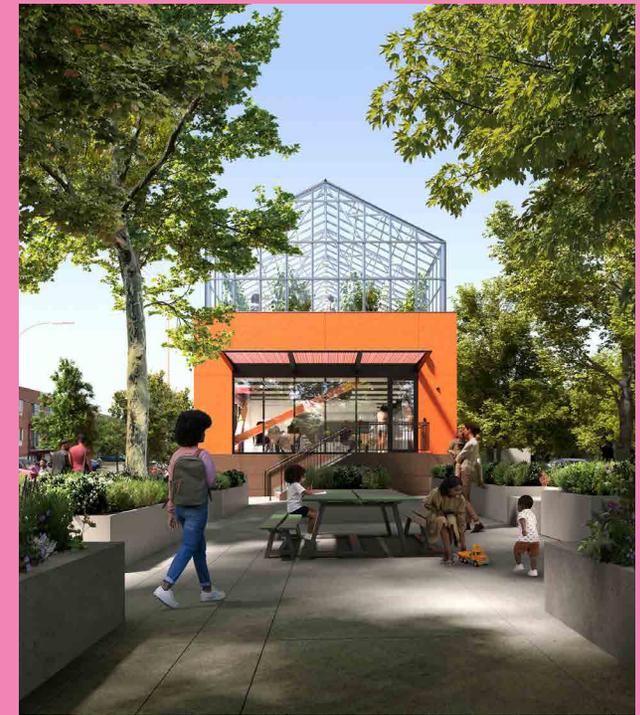


Castle Hill Houses farms.





Engagement event at Marlboro Houses.



Rendering of the new education center.

Agricultural Education Center at Marlboro

“This new, state-of-the-art facility will allow NYCHA residents to plug into indoor food production, and will serve as a community hub for health and wellness programming grounded in food.”

— Andrea Mata, NYCHA’s Director of Resident Health Initiatives



New agricultural education center coming to Marlboro Houses.

Resident Gardens

NYCHA's resident gardens number about 1,000 today and are much beloved even though they cover small areas. NYCHA's long-term support for resident-led and managed open spaces has yielded long-term benefits at a modest cost. The sophistication of these spaces has grown over time, including raised beds and protective screening.



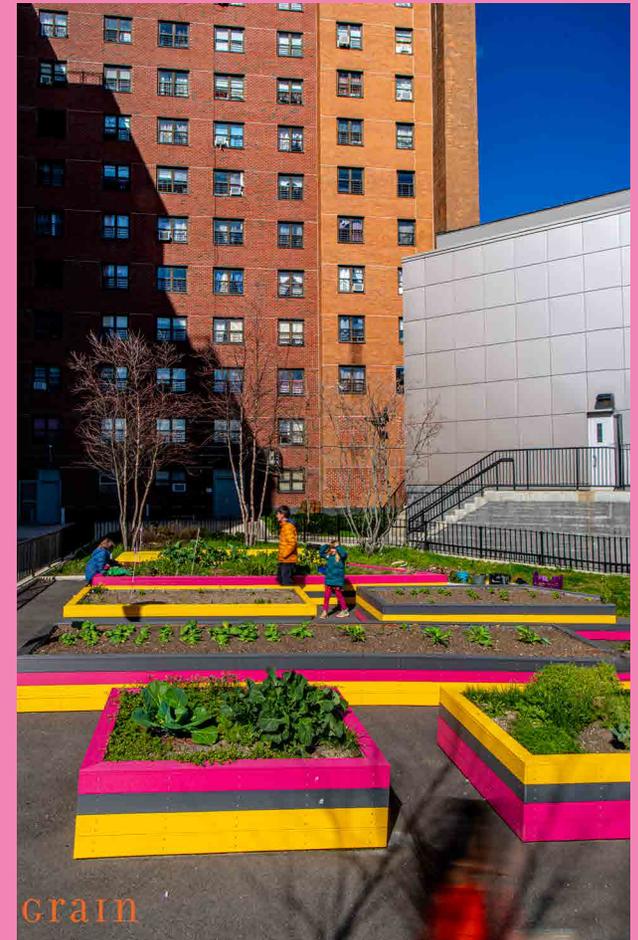
Garden beds at Williamsburg Houses.



Garden at the Washington Houses.



Resident Garden at Marlboro Houses Garden.



Vegetable bed gardens at Carleton Manor.

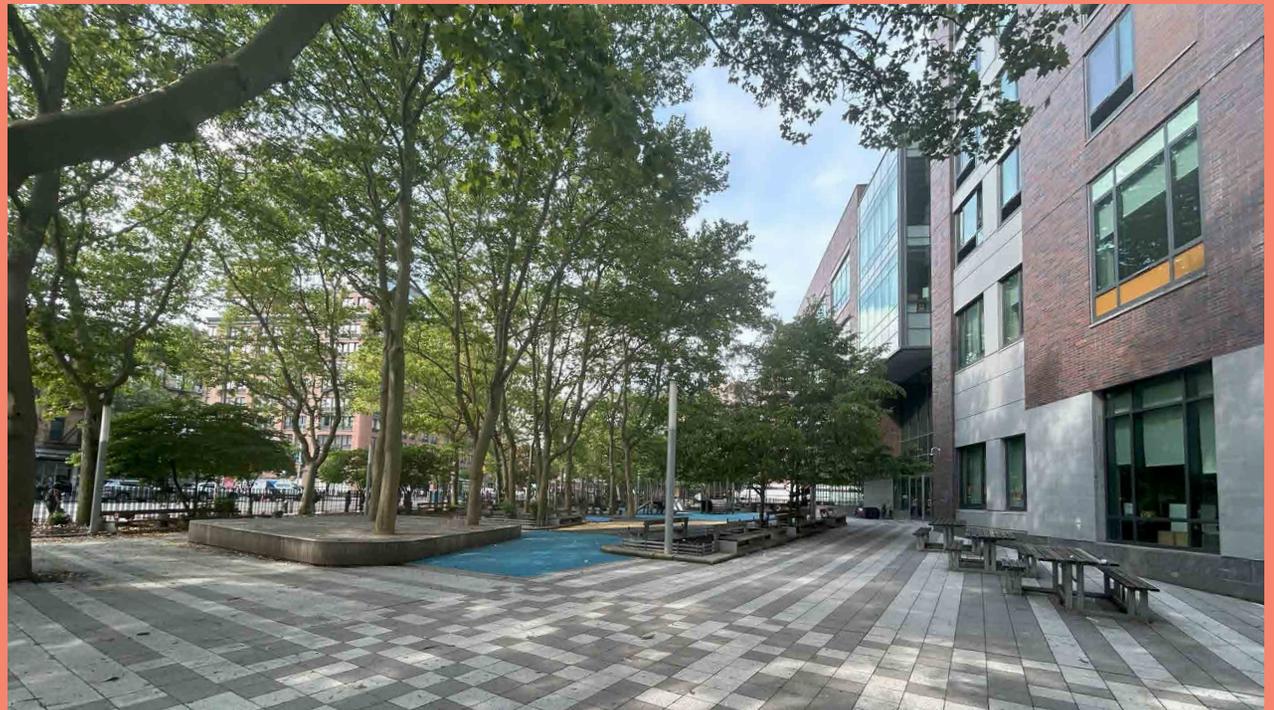
Reframing the Superblocks

With sensitive design, NYCHA's vast open spaces can accommodate affordable housing, new community centers, and renewed city parks. Repurposing NYCHA land to meet growing social needs citywide also offers a better quality of resident life.



New affordable housing / mixed use project, Van Dyke Houses.

See case study:
"Washington Houses"



New City Park and mixed-use development; Washington Houses.

New Community Centers

NYCHA developed a pioneering community center development program in the nineteen nineties under the guidance of designer David Burney. The new community centers have multiple roles, including acting as community activity anchors, defining adjacent outdoor open spaces, and providing activity day and night. At Van Dyke Houses, a glassy community center links open spaces and makes a plaza on the central street.



Community Center and Public Space at Van Dyke Houses.



New playground and housing building at Van Dyke.



New basketball court and affordable housing, Van Dyke Houses.

Affordable Housing Reshapes Landscapes

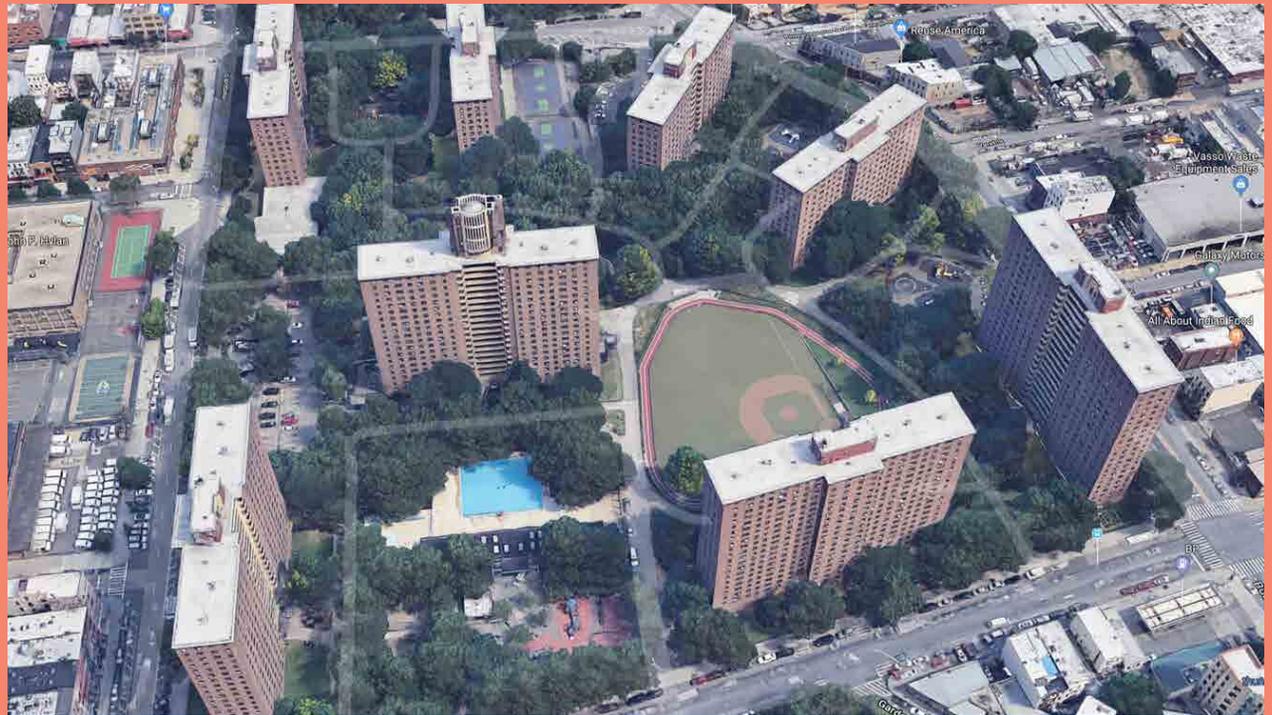
New affordable housing complexes have added liveliness, community resources, and open spaces to a few older NYCHA projects. At Washington Houses in Manhattan, affordable housing, a charter school, and a new city park activate the older development's edge. At Van Dyke Houses in Brownsville, an innovative mixed-use affordable housing development adds housing options, community-focused rental spaces, and renovated exterior spaces for residents.

Renovated City Parks

City Parks on NYCHA grounds stand out for their comparative success. They thrive because of park attendants, comfort stations, renovated equipment, and active recreation like basketball and tennis. Located most frequently on the edge of superblocks, they are also advertised as open to the public and thus welcome a broad audience.

The city parks at NYCHA vary greatly. For instance, the Parks Department maintains a pool and playground at Bushwick Houses in Brooklyn. Many opportunities exist for additional City Parks on NYCHA grounds, should the funding and resident support be secured.

The popular Samuel N. Bennerson 2nd Playground at Manhattan's Amsterdam Houses was developed in 1949 "for the families in the project and the residents of the surrounding congested community." The park's recent renovation was a multi-million-dollar project, which included two basketball courts, various play equipments, spray fountains and an adult fitness area.



Pool and playground at the Bushwick Houses.



New play equipment at Bennerson Playground, Amsterdam Houses.

Case Studies

The selection of case studies covers open space conditions across a variety of NYCHA planning types. Both the analytical models and the comparative data show changing attitudes towards the uses and performance of the open space in developments. The case studies are compared using the criteria of Vegetation, Surfaces, Public Art, and Playgrounds.



Analysis Criteria

Surfaces

The permeability and materiality of ground surfaces can have a large effect on both the perceived temperature and the ability of the open space to manage water. The higher the percentage of permeability, the better the open spaces perform.

Permeable

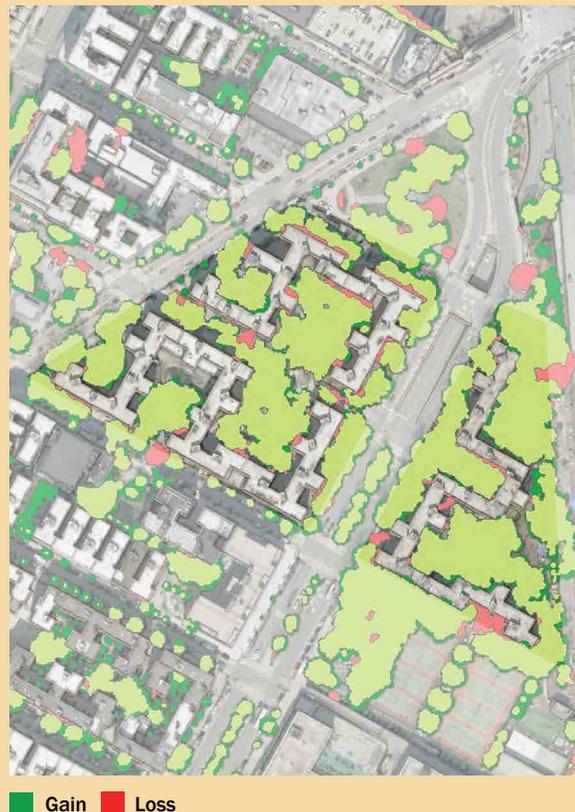
Impermeable



Tree Canopy

The density of the tree canopy directly affects ambient temperature, humidity levels, and general thermal comfort through the shading of open spaces. LIDAR scans track the changes over the last 10 years; canopy gain is typically the result of continued growth and replanting, while canopy loss can be the result of infestation and poor maintenance.

Tree Canopy Lidar Scan



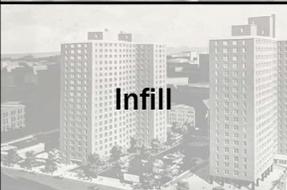
Playgrounds

NYCHA playground started with a balance between free and structured play areas, slowly incorporating ball courts and water play over time. The percentage of open space that is playgrounds indicates a dedication to children's needs.

Playground Activities



Case Study Analysis

NYCHA Project		Planning Typology	Tree Canopy % Change, 10 years	Permeable Surfaces % of open space	Playgrounds SF/ child
Harlem River Houses Borough Manhattan (Harlem) Year Built 1935		 <p>Courtyard</p>	8% GAIN	30	56
Patterson Houses Borough Bronx (Mott Haven) Year Built 1950		 <p>Superblock</p>	4% LOSS	55	44
Ocean Bay Houses Borough Queens (The Rockaways) Year Built 1953		 <p>Superblock</p>	47% LOSS	46	40
Washington Houses Borough Manhattan (Harlem) Year Built 1957		 <p>Towers in the Park</p>	30% GAIN	62	32
Roosevelt Houses Borough Brooklyn (Bedford-Stuyvesant) Year Built 1961		 <p>Towers in the Park</p>	70% LOSS	35	51
Stephen Wise Towers Borough Manhattan (Upper West Side) Year Built 1962		 <p>Infill</p>	18% LOSS	17	178

Harlem River Houses



Harlem River Houses model.



View of one of the entry courts.

Borough	Manhattan (Harlem)
Year Built	1935
Architects	Archibald Manning Brown
Landscape Architects	Michael Rapuano

This project is an excellent example of the early NYCHA planning strategies that used an articulated perimeter block massing to define both the street edge and an interior courtyard, with entries off a shared courtyard, separated from the street and sidewalk.

See typical characteristics of NYCHA grounds in: "Surfaces" & "Vegetation"



Entryway from 7th Avenue.



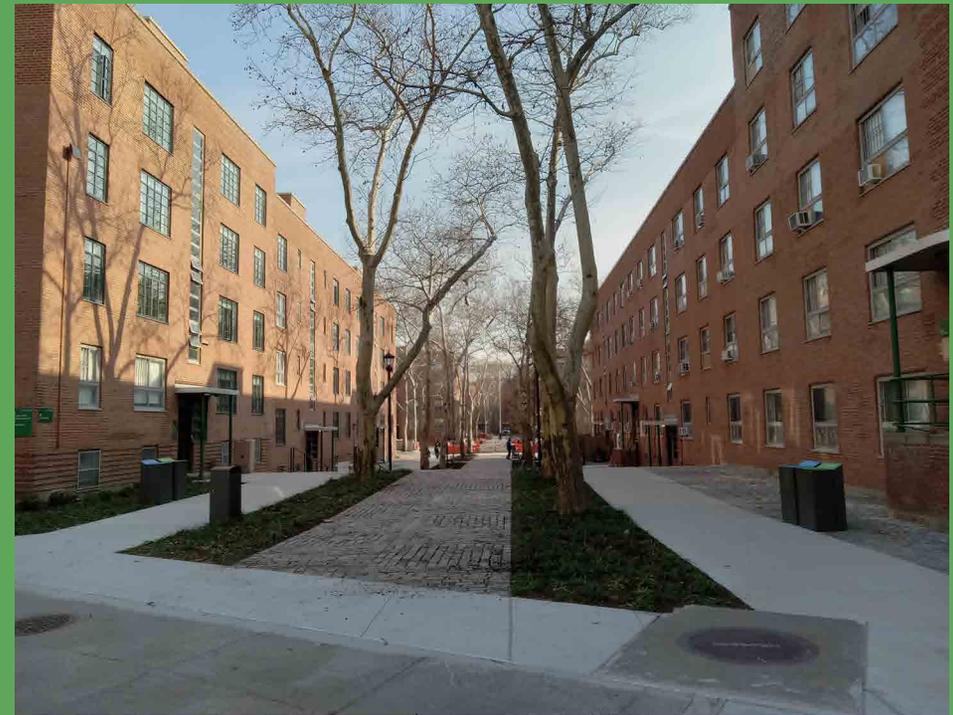
Lot Coverage

Building Coverage 32%
Open Space 68%

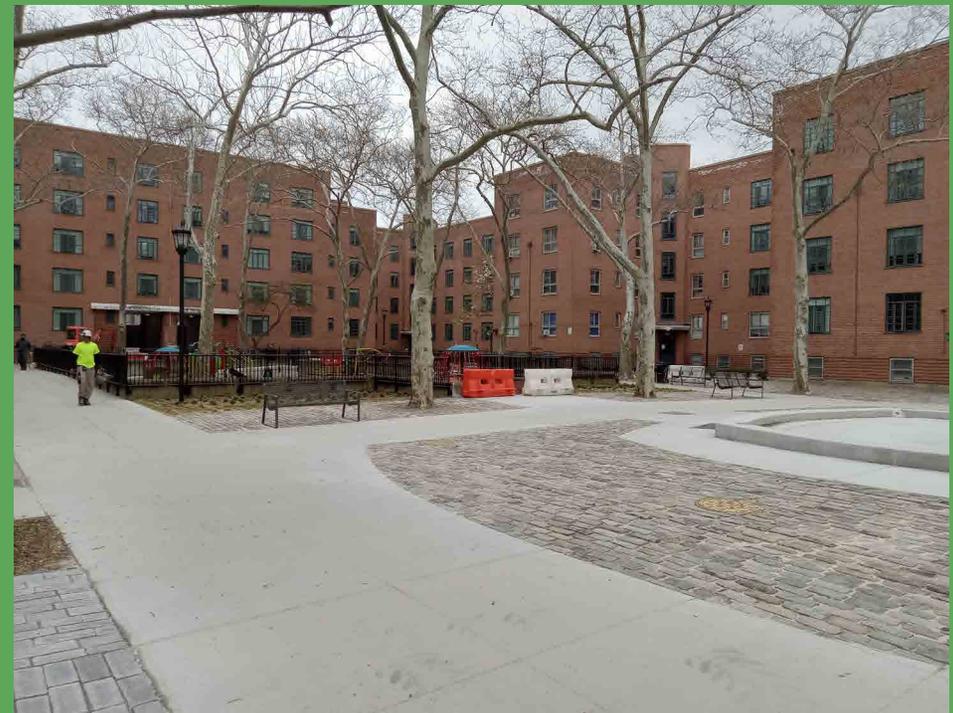
**30%
PERMEABLE
SURFACES**

Surfaces

The lot coverage is indicative of early NYCHA densities; the planning of the surfaces provides a variety of porous surfaces that help distribute movement and resting spaces.



Permeable pavers along the passage on West 152nd St.



Pavers mark the sitting areas and surround the fountain.



Tree Canopy Change

- Gain
- Loss

**8%
CANOPY GAIN
in 10 years**

Vegetation

The mix of taller trees along the main allée and low but dense shade trees in the courtyards were in contrast with the flowering shrubs adjacent to the entries.



Courtyard trees



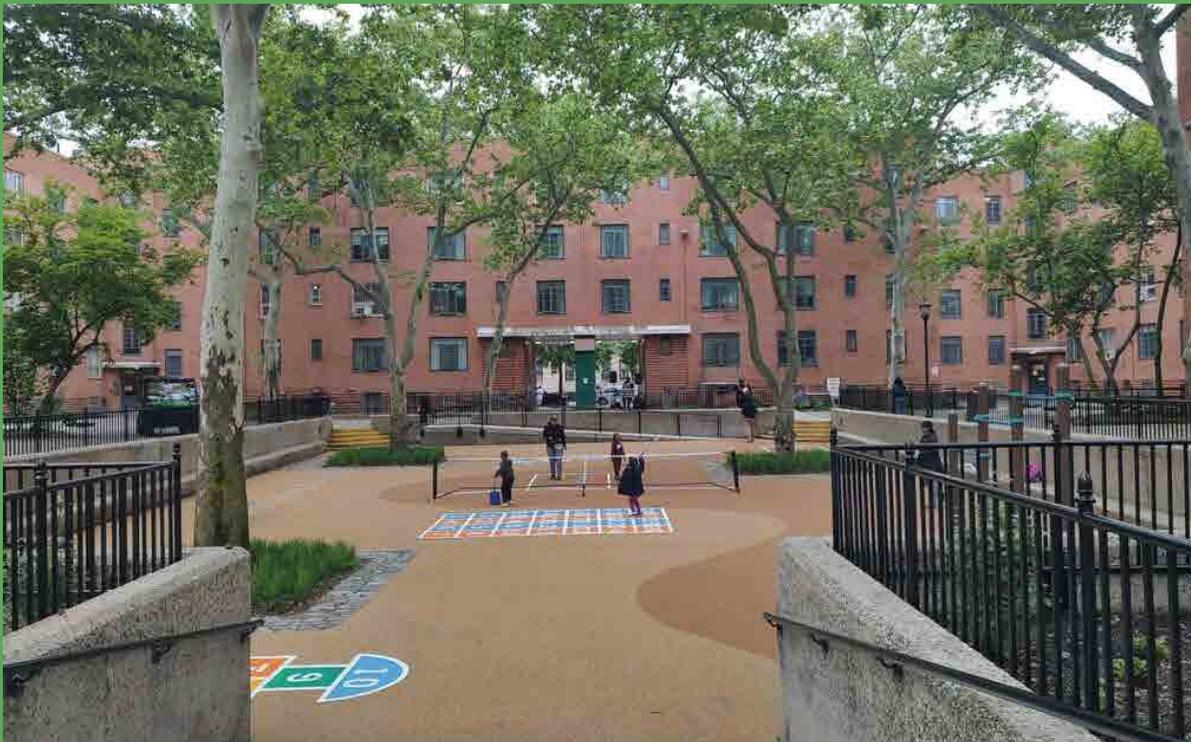
Artist's mural on the passage wall at Harlem River Houses, 1967.



Bears Playing (1938), by Heinz Warneke for the Harlem River Houses.



A 1937 Heinz Warneke sculpture depicting a mother with a child and dog.



Open Space For Playgrounds

Open Space	68 %
Playground % of O.S	7 %
Number of Playgrounds	3

Activities

Structured Play	8 %
Free play	78 %
Ball Games	1 %
Water Features	13 %

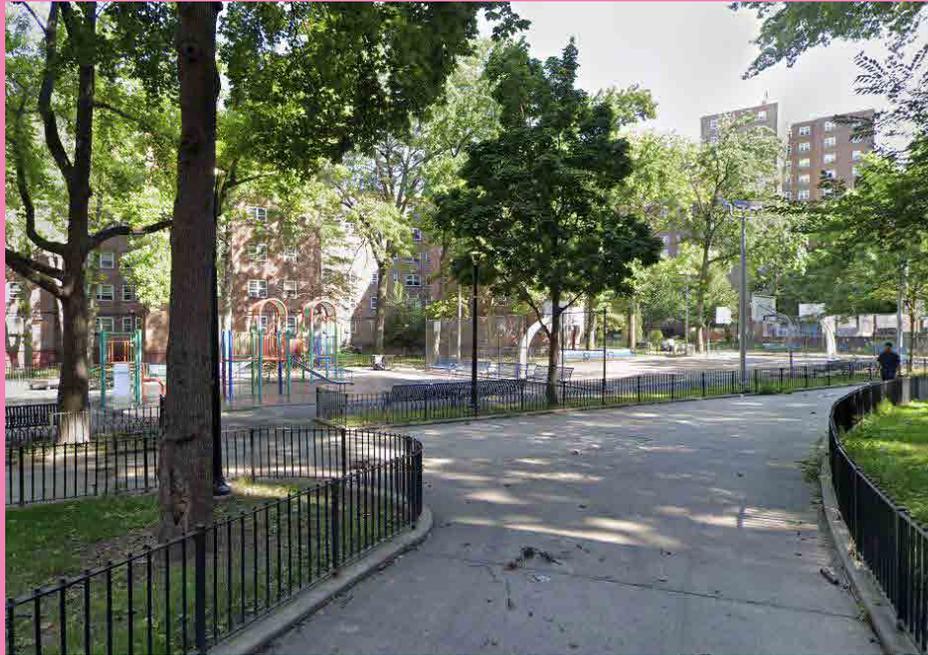
The courtyard space is dedicated to playground activities and water features, allowing the upper courtyard to become a zone for families and relaxation.



Renovated playgrounds.

56 sf
PLAYGROUND per child

Patterson Houses



View of the central playground.



View from Morris Avenue.

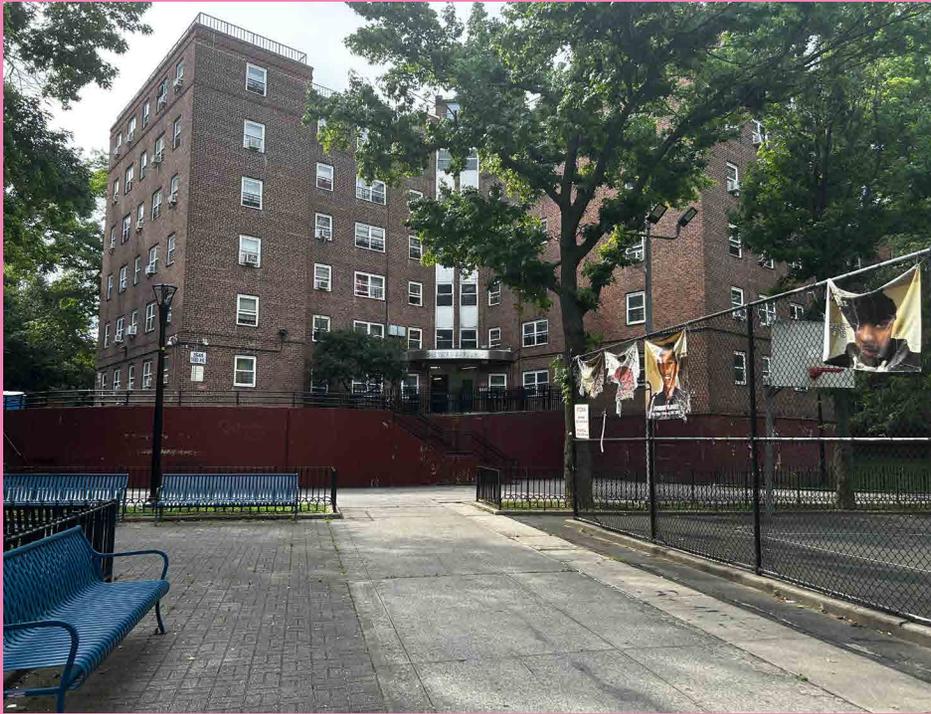
Borough	Bronx (Mott Haven)
Year Built	1950
Architects	Morrisania Project Associated Architects
Landscape Architects	Clark & Rapuano

The site planning and building distribution of the Houses is based on a pedestrian path structure that more or less follows the historical street grid - the one that was removed when the blocks were combined into two superblocks.

There is a wealth of resident-driven open space design on the site. There are opportunities for more diverse offerings - currently many playgrounds and basketball courts.



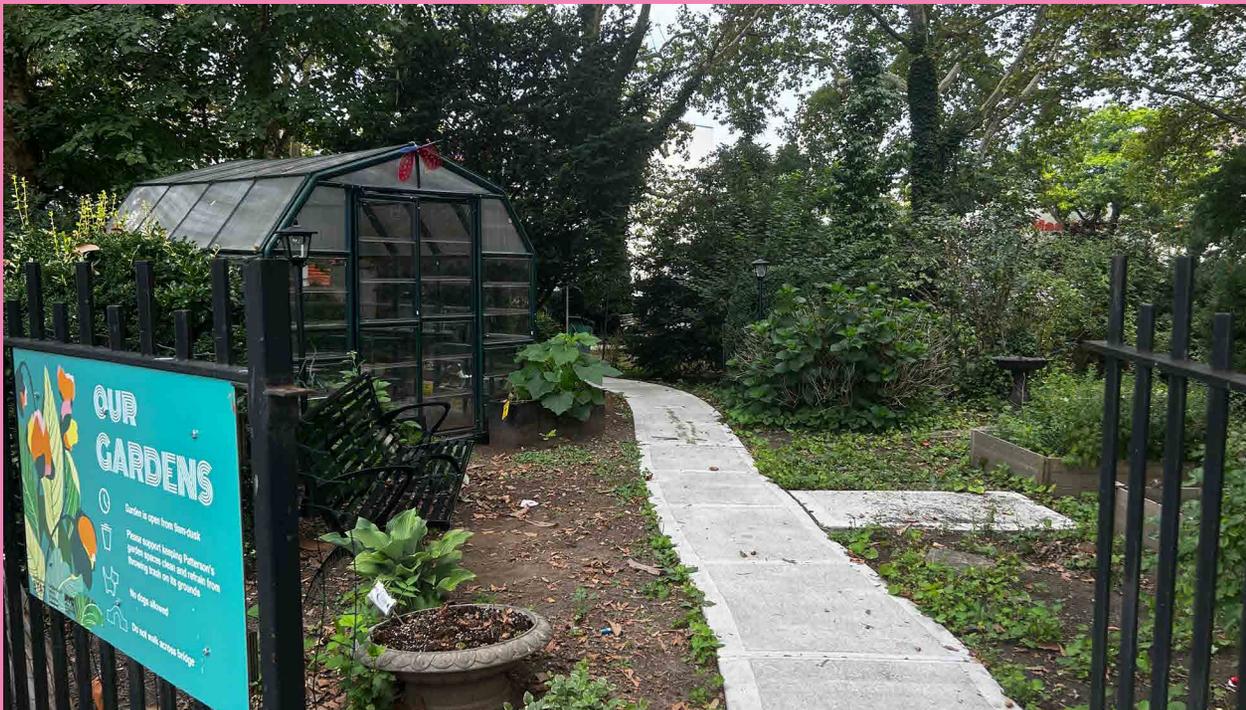
Patterson Houses urban model.



Before: view of the largest surface wall around the central playground.



After: the new Old Timers' Mural, honoring former residents and community.



Garden managed by the residents.

Public Safety & Community Design

Significant pedestrian through-traffic on the site, with people moving from the primarily residential neighborhoods to the east through the Houses to the multiple institutions along Morris Avenue to the west. This has created tensions within the broader neighborhood and some lack of clarity on who the open spaces of Patterson are for.

See how resident-based process have yielded improvements in: "Safety Through Community Design"



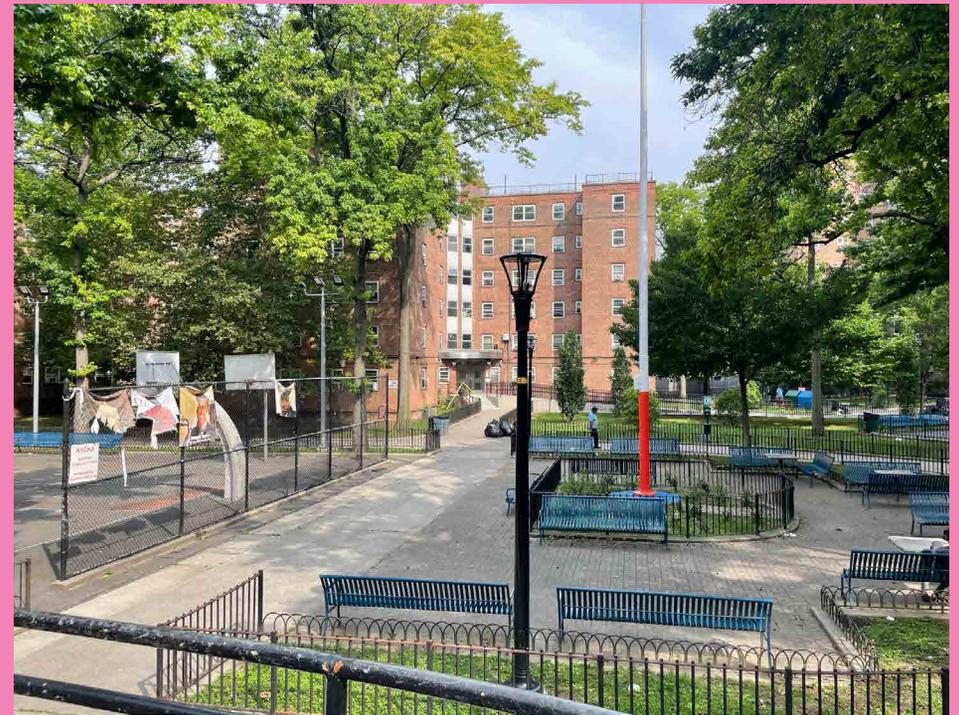
Lot Coverage

Building Coverage	22%
Open Space	78%

**55%
PERMEABLE
SURFACES**

Surfaces

The open spaces, particularly in the western half of Patterson, suffer from poor drainage and are at significant risk as sea level rise continues.



The central space is a mix of surfaces, with pavers found only by the sitting areas.



View of the typical large concrete pathways in Patterson.



Tree Canopy Change

- Gain
- Loss

**4%
CANOPY LOSS
in 10 years**

Vegetation

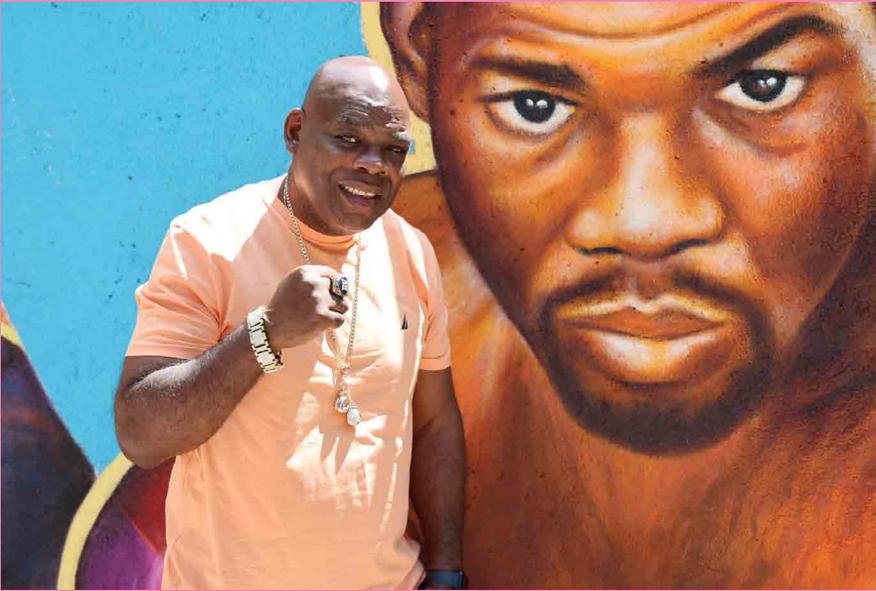
The tree canopy is extensive and throughout the site, but the ground cover is less varied and is not resilient to the stresses of traffic pollution and sea level rise.



The abundance of trees casts the majority of the grounds in the shade.



Grass lawns with few shrubs.



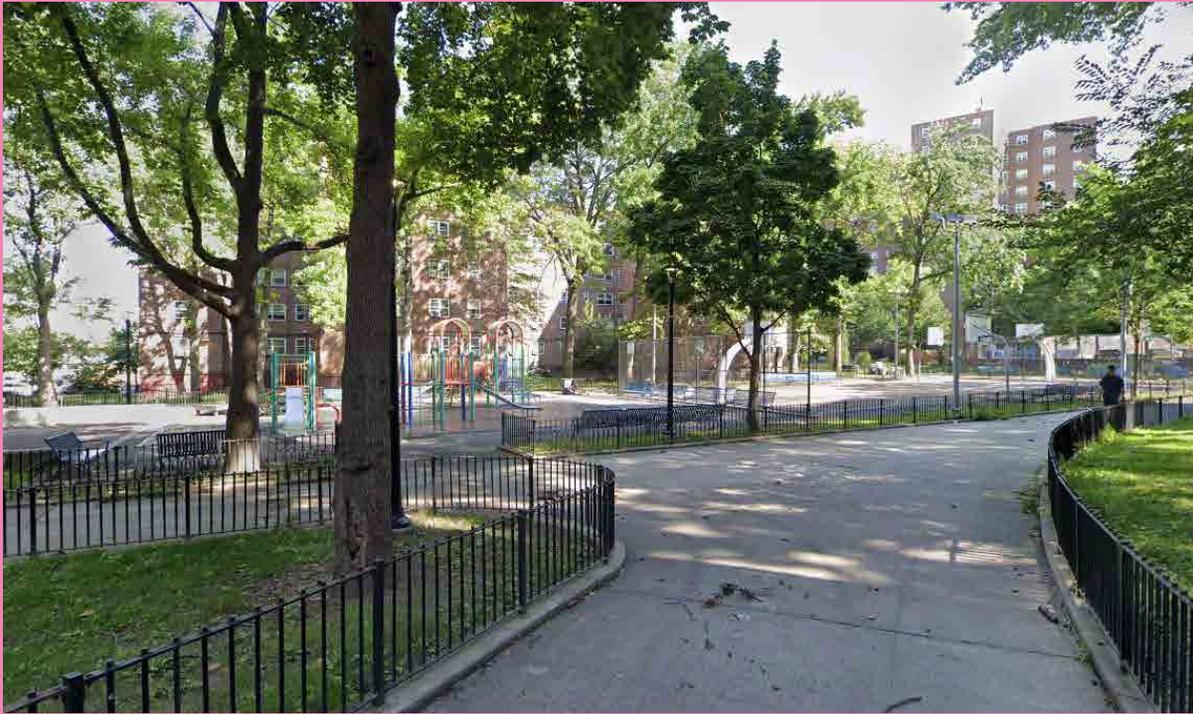
Iran Barkley, former Patterson resident and boxing world champion.



Action Plan 2.0 was one of the youth designed projects utilizing art as medium.



The Old Timers' Mural at Patterson Houses honors former notable residents and celebrates the NYCHA community.



View of the basketball court and playgrounds structures, inside one of the central open spaces.

Open Space For Playgrounds

Open Space	78 %
Playground % of O.S	4 %
Number of Playgrounds	6

Activities

Structured Play	18 %
Free play	34 %
Ball Games	45 %
Water Features	3 %

Both Nate “Tiny” Archibald and Angelo Cruz grew up in Patterson Houses. The refurbished court sits at the center of the development and is referred to as Patterson Square Garden. It serves as a space of pride for the residents of the houses and the broader Mott Haven community.



Playground structures.



The renovated basketball court by East 143rd St.

**44 sf
PLAYGROUND per child**

Ocean Bay Houses



Ocean Bay Houses model.



View from 54th St.

Borough	Queens (The Rockaways)
Year Built	1953
Architects	Bloch + Hesse
Landscape Architects	Shumavon, Tregenza + Breglia

The planning here followed the superblock organization of expansive courtyard spaces with little relationship between entries and open space activities. This “loose-fit urbanism” made it difficult to define spaces with either the buildings or the landscape.



Resiliency measures included new rain gardens and various storm-resistant mechanical systems.



Berms with native seaside plants.



Grounds mechanical equipment.



Rehabilitation of public spaces under RAD.

RAD Improvements in Ocean Bay

Ocean Bay Apartments was New York City's first and the nation's largest single-site public housing conversion under HUD's Rental Assistance Demonstration (RAD) program.

See more about recent renovations around NYCHA in: "PACT Landscapes"



Lot Coverage

Building Coverage 15%
Open Space 85%

**46%
PERMEABLE
SURFACES**

Surfaces

The superblock planning makes for extremely low lot coverage and stark contrast between pavement and grass with little variety of surface coverage; this has become more diverse since the RAD program. Large areas devoted to parking given the locations.



Asphalt pathways cut in-between grass patches surrounding the buildings.



One of the project's parking areas.



Tree Canopy Change

- Gain
- Loss

**47%
CANOPY LOSS
in 10 years**

Vegetation

Trees and shrubs were used primarily to mark pathways instead of providing shade. Much of the vegetation was not suitable to a coastal location, and was lost during Hurricane Sandy.



New seaside plants to increase the project storm resiliency.



Shrubs along water catchment points.



Open Space For Playgrounds

Open Space	85 %
Playground % of O.S	7 %
Number of Playgrounds	15

Activities

Structured Play	7 %
Free play	45 %
Ball Games	45 %
Water Features	3 %

Despite the large amount of open space, very little was dedicated to playground or active recreation. Planning in the 1950s began to incorporate ball fields into the open space. Recent upgrades through the RAD program brought in community gardens and waterworks.



**40 sf
PLAYGROUND per child**

Renovated playgrounds under RAD.

Washington Houses



Washington Houses model.



View from East 102nd Street.

Borough	Manhattan (Harlem)
Year Built	1957
Architects	Alfred Hopkins + Associates
Landscape Architects	Janet Darling, Innocenti + Webel

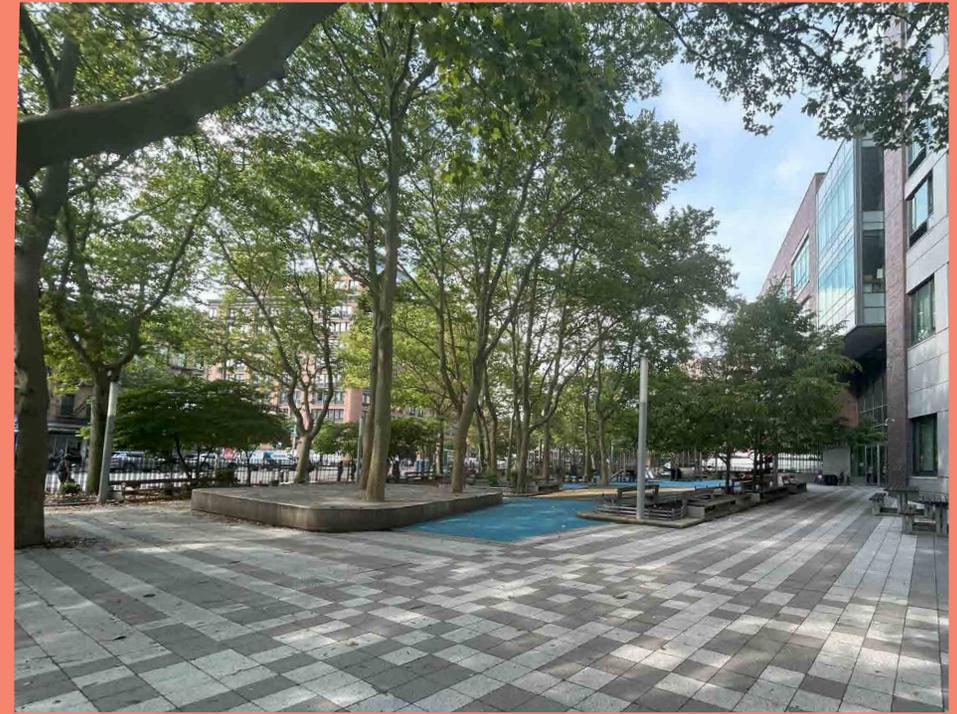
This project covering seven Manhattan blocks in Harlem followed tower in the park planning principles with north-south building orientations set up in relationship to subsurface conditions. Despite the abundance of shaded open space, there is a limited amount of programmed area.



View from 2nd Avenue.



The new DREAM Charter School and the adjacent Yomo Toro Apartments.



Blake Hobbs Park playground maintained under the NYC Park department.



Passage between the school and NYCHA houses.



Sitting platform at Blake Hobbs Park playground.

Campus Infill: New Charter School

In recent years NYCHA has sold the development rights to either underutilized or vacant land situated within its housing superblocks. At the Washington Houses, the new 143,000 sf mixed-use development activated an underutilized parking lot and playground. This included a charter school and affordable housing, new playground equipment, and the renovation of nearby Blake Hobbs Park.

See how NYCHA has repurposed other open spaces in: **"Reframing the Superblocks"**



Lot Coverage

Building Coverage 14%
Open Space 86%

**62%
PERMEABLE
SURFACES**

Surfaces

The open space here is a monotone mixture of asphalt paths and grass open space. There is no relationship between open space and building entry.



Typical wide pathway.



Tree Canopy Change

- Gain
- Loss

**30%
CANOPY GAIN
in 10 years**

Vegetation

The classic NYCHA mix of London Plane and Honey Locust trees has thrived in this location and the canopy has grown as expected over time. Very few shrubs and hedges remain from the initial design.



A mixture of trees and shrubs surround the gathering areas.



Resident farm.



Mural celebrating the Puerto Rican community at Washington Houses.



Sculptural benches at the Cherry Tree playground, adjacent to the houses.



Renovated basketball and handball courts.

Open Space For Playgrounds

Open Space	86 %
Playground % of O.S	3 %
Number of Playgrounds	5

Activities

Structured Play	25 %
Free play	62 %
Ball Games	N.A %
Water Features	13 %

One of the lowest percentages of playgrounds-to-child ratio, this project took advantage of adjacent city park spaces and schools to offer infrastructure for children.



A shaded picnic and seating area is among the new site amenities for the ADA compliant playground.

**32 sf
PLAYGROUND per child**

Roosevelt Houses



Playground at the Roosevelt Houses.



Lawns resulting from "Towers in the Park" planning.

Borough Brooklyn (Bedford-Stuyvesant)
Year Built 1961
Architects A. Gordon Latimer
Landscape Architects Clark & Rapuano

The open spaces of Roosevelt Houses have been subject to various environmental stresses. When originally realized, the large swaths of open space between buildings had limited programming which was primarily focused on children. The majority of the remaining open space is unshaded, hard surfaced, and underutilized.



Roosevelt Houses urban model.



Parking area along the street.



Unshaded lawns by one of the building's entry.



Typical playgrounds are hardscaped and unshaded.



Environmental Stresses

The loss of 70% of the tree canopy due to infestation, combined with 65% of the ground surfaces being hardscape, make for open spaces that are difficult to enjoy and hard to maintain.

See typical characteristics of NYCHA grounds in: "Surfaces" & "Vegetation"



Lot Coverage

Building Coverage	16%
Open Space	84%

**35%
PERMEABLE
SURFACES**

Surfaces

The majority of the open space is unshaded, hard surfaced, and underutilized, including the wide sidewalks and minimal foot paths. Existing ball courts and playgrounds are in disrepair.



Wide sidewalks surround the project perimeters.



Almost all the plazas in Roosevelt are covered in concrete.



Tree Canopy Change

- Gain
- Loss

**70%
CANOPY LOSS
in 10 years**

Vegetation

The significant canopy loss makes for vast open spaces with no shading or noise protection from the adjacent streets. The community garden is dynamic and creates a focal point and entry to one of the buildings.



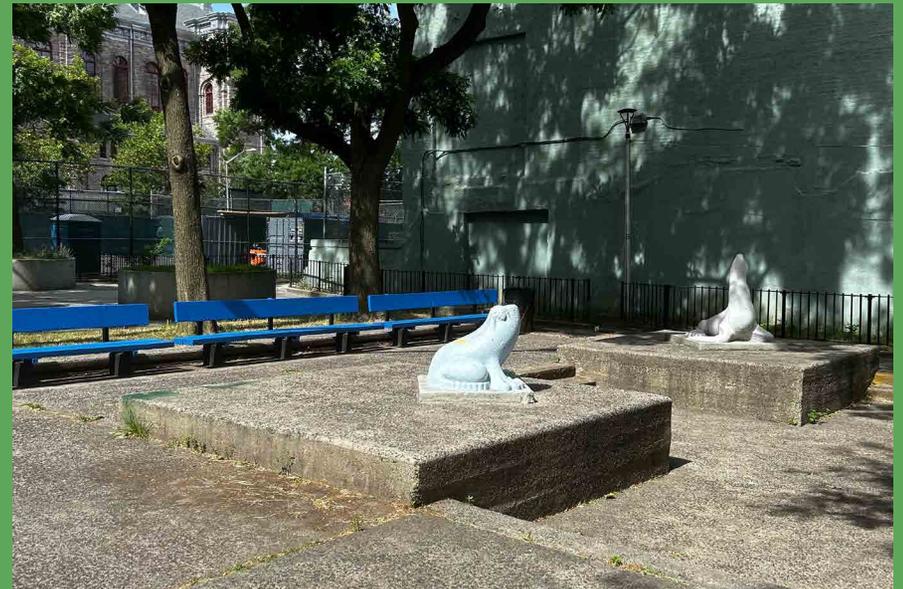
Sparse trees remain scattered over the project lawns.



Community garden.



Community Center mural.



Animal sculpture playground.



Open Space For Playgrounds

Open Space	84 %
Playground % of O.S	7 %
Number of Playgrounds	8

Activities

Structured Play	43 %
Free play	18 %
Ball Games	39 %
Water Features	N.A %

When originally realized, the large swaths of open space between buildings had limited programming which was primarily focused on children. All playgrounds were hardscaped. Movement possibilities between building and within the open spaces were minimal; today a number of playgrounds have been replaced by maintenance equipment.



**51 sf
PLAYGROUND per child**

Playgrounds.

Stephen Wise Towers



Stephen Wise Towers model.



View of the community plaza.

Borough	Manhattan (Upper West)
Year Built	1962
Architects	Knappe + Johnson
Landscape Architects	Schreiner + Schmitt

One of the last NYCHA development projects, it represents the block infill strategy that sought higher densities on smaller sites within the city fabric. Entries to the buildings are oriented to the street.



View from W 91st St.



In 2020 Wise Towers converted to NYCHA's PACT program and received upgrades to redesign and restore its outdoor areas. Included was the full restoration of the Constantino Nivola art, which included the horses, and two concrete pyramids that originally operated as a water feature but were non-functional for years. These artworks have long been an integral part of Wise Towers' cultural fabric, serving as a playground, meeting point, and neighborhood attraction.

See how artworks have decorated NYCHA in: "Public Art"

5 ARTWORKS including sculptures & murals

View of the the community plaza with the sculpted horses, mural, fountain and relief wall.



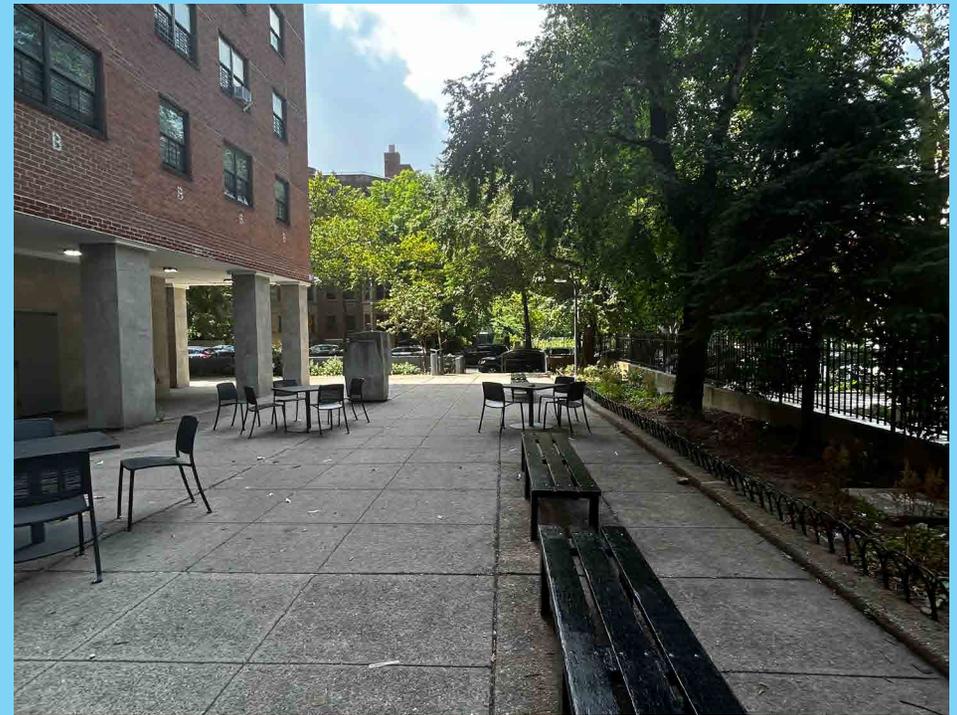
Lot Coverage

Building Coverage	35%
Open Space	65%

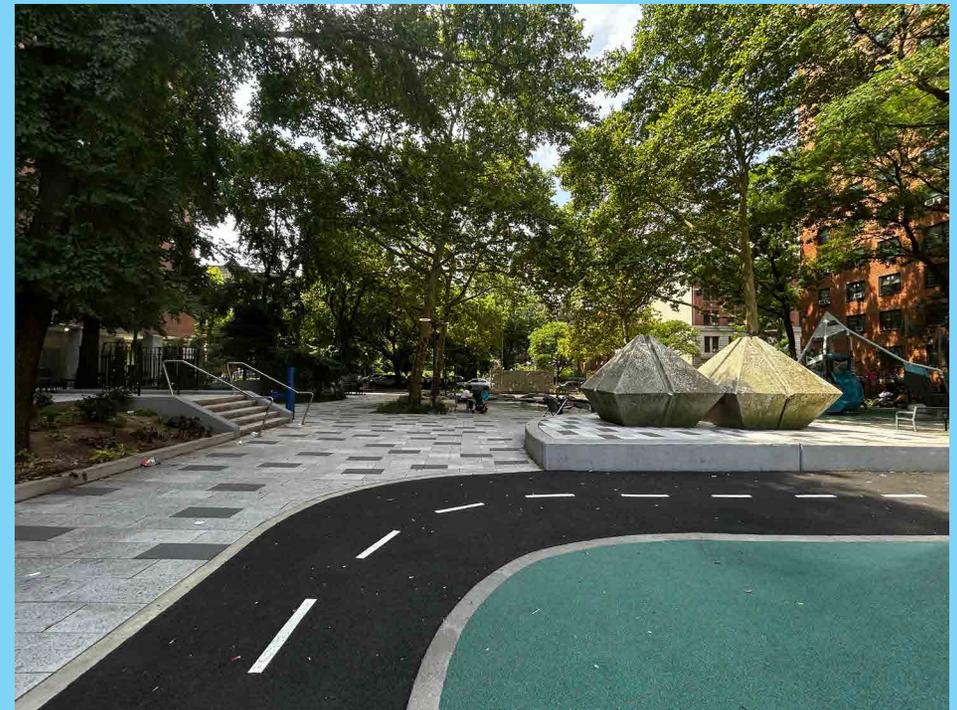
**17%
PERMEABLE
SURFACES**

Surfaces

Wise Towers returns to the lot coverage of earlier NYCHA projects with minimal permeable surfaces due to the high percentage of play and seating areas that act as a kind of modified courtyard.



Sitting area adjacent to the first tower.



Much of the open space is either paved or covered with playground safety mats.



Tree Canopy Change

- Gain
- Loss

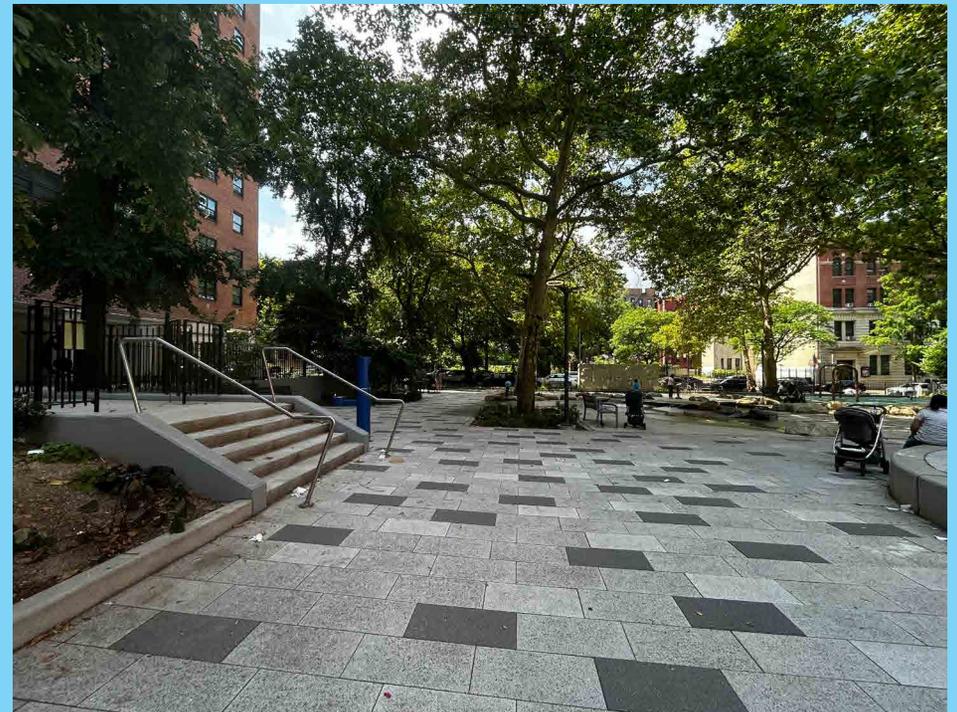
**18%
CANOPY LOSS
in 10 years**

Vegetation

Despite the smaller open spaces, ample shade is provided throughout the project through a combination of the trees on site and the adjacent street trees.



Shaded passage between the second tower and raised play court.



The extensive tree canopy shades the central courtyard throughout the day.



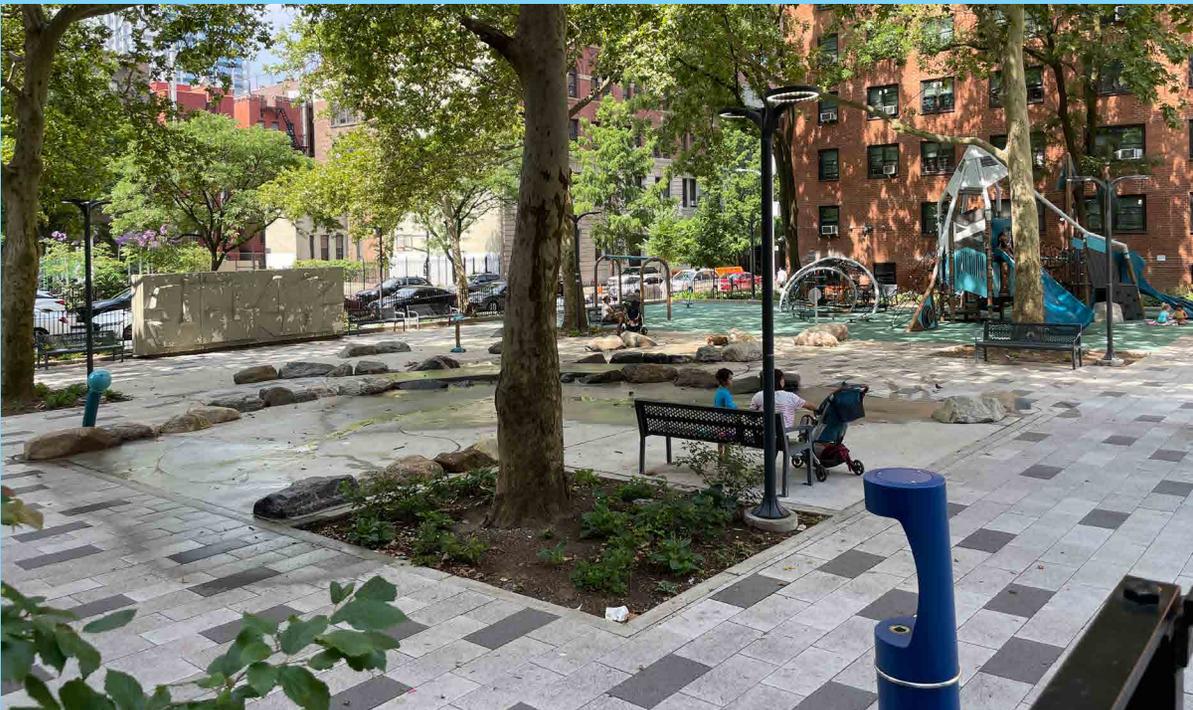
Open Space For Playgrounds

Open Space	65 %
Playground % of O.S	54 %
Number of Playgrounds	5

Activities

Structured Play	20 %
Free play	55 %
Ball Games	20 %
Water Features	5 %

Wise Towers creates three distinct activity spaces: a playground space with parental seating at the center with two secondary spaces with active play and child center related activities.

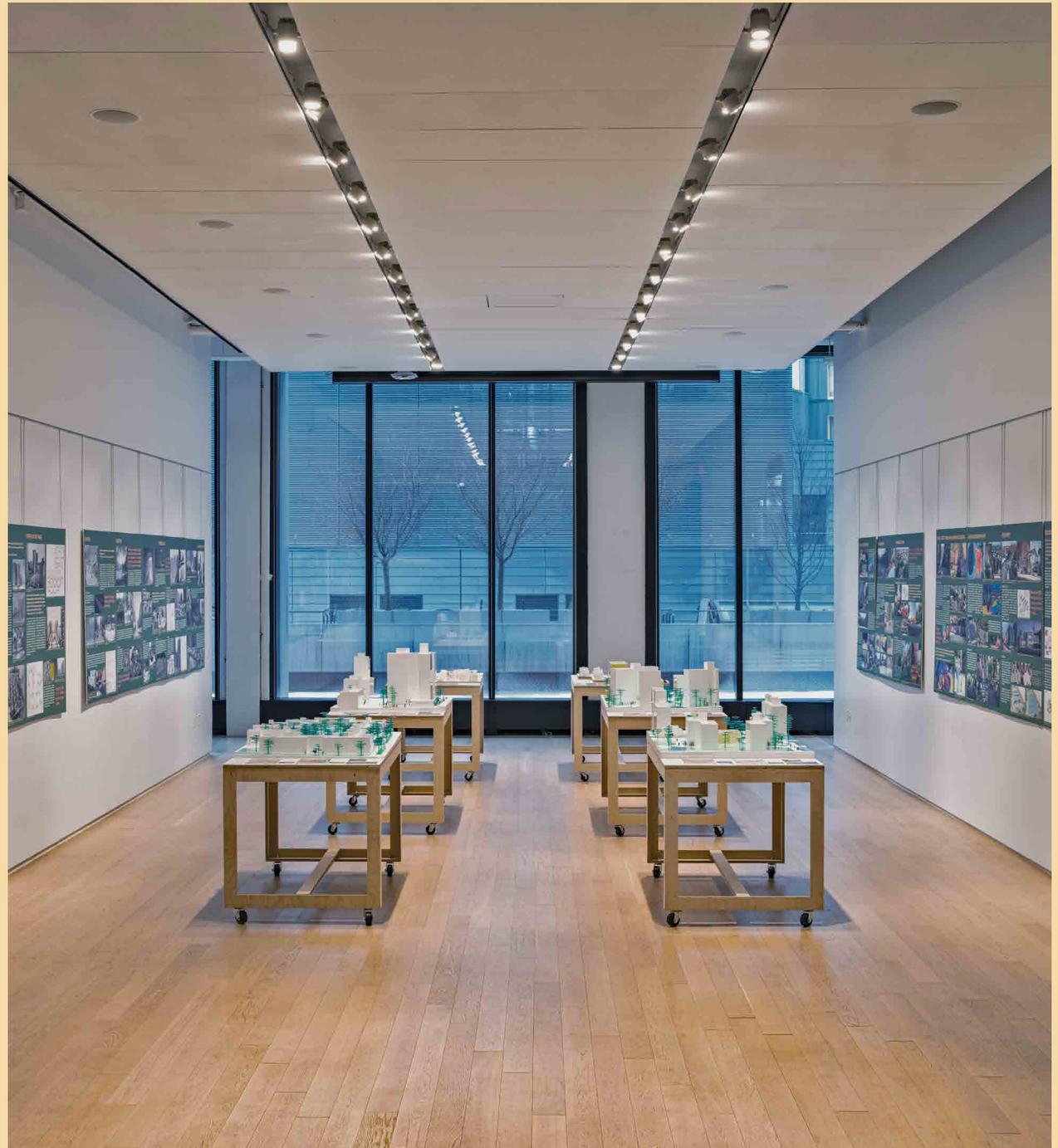


Preserved historical art and sculptures inside the renovated playground space.

**178 sf
PLAYGROUND per child**

Installations

The Living In The Shade exhibition has traveled nationally to a variety of locations, each with their own spatial character and type of visitor interaction. The exhibition has been located in professional, academic and historical contexts, enriching the access people have to the research.



FXCollaborative

January 9 – February 27, 2025
1 Willoughby Square, 7th Floor,
Brooklyn, NY

[Read the press release here](#)



View of the historical wall panels.



View of the contemporary wall panels.

LaGuardia Community College

March 25 – May 23, 2025
Shenker Hall, 31-10 Thomson Ave,
Long Island City, NY

[Read the press release here](#)



The LaGuardia student photography for NYCHA today.



View of the historical wall section and open space models.

National Public Housing Museum

July 23 - November 9, 2025

Special Exhibits Gallery,
919 South Ada Street, Chicago, IL

[Read the press release here](#)



Historical playgrounds section with models.



View of the contemporary wall and and open space models.

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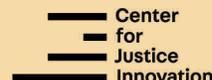


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