



Architects serve a different kind of client at 2018 Day of Service

The Day of Service at A'18 showcased architects' commitment to New York City's most vulnerable populations.

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It's a gloomy, chilly June day on Manhattan's Upper West Side, but at the Church of St. Paul and St. Andrew, a community space in the basement of the circa-1897 structure is becoming just a little bit brighter. The formerly dingy, mustard-yellow walls are being covered in coats of bright, clean white, and new overhead light fixtures cast everything in a well-defined glow.

This project has been in the works for a few days—or a few years, depending on how you look at it—but today is when over a dozen volunteers from a variety of firms and stages in their architecture careers are lending their time and skills to help as part of the 2018 AIA Conference on Architecture's Day of Service, an initiative that was coordinated by AIANY (with sponsorship from ConstructConnect).

James Wagman, AIA, principal of Manhattan-based firm James Wagman Architect and a 1981 graduate of Brooklyn's Pratt Institute, has been involved with the women's shelter located in the church's basement for a little over a decade. When AIANY sent out a call for architects to partner on service projects in conjunction with the 2018 Conference on Architecture, Wagman saw the perfect opportunity to use his experience and skillset to transform the well-worn space into one that was more welcoming and hospitable. He enlisted the help of construction company Silver Lining, as well as Cline Bettridge Bernstein Lighting Design, which donated time and new fixtures to brighten the high-ceilinged community room that serves as both an eating area and sleeping space for women experiencing homelessness.

Wagman currently volunteers at the shelter about once a month, setting up beds for clients who sleep in the church overnight and helping with dinner set-up and cleanup. When he heard about AIANY's call for projects, he wanted to take advantage of the critical mass of architects and other industry professionals who would be descending on the city for the conference to assist him in improving a space that has become incredibly important to him.

"Since I've volunteered for the last 10 or 12 years, I realized how fortunate I am," he says. "This place does so much for people who have so little. I just love [volunteering]."

Around the room, volunteers from a variety of firms and stages in their architecture careers are applying coats of paint to walls that were primed a few days in advance. One of the painters is Marty Griggs, a principal at Walter B. Melvin Architects, which focuses on restoration architecture and historic preservation. He's been involved with pro-bono restoration work on the 121-year-old church for the last 15 years.

"It's great to be able to work with a client that really does great things for the community," Riggs says. "The service that they provide to this general area is amazing, so it's nice to be able to help out."

Above and beyond for schools

In Harlem, three miles uptown, volunteers from New York-based firm Murphy Burnham & Buttrick are kneeling over two-by-fours in a schoolyard at P.S./M.S. 7, surrounded by planters containing chives, wood sorrel, sunflowers, and more. They're working on building "bean tunnels," which will keep growing bean vines off the ground while creating a leafy green overpass for students to walk through.

M.S. 7 is a "demonstration school" for Edible Schoolyard NYC, an organization that partners with public schools in New York to integrate garden and kitchen classes into the school day, with the hope that it will engender a love of healthy eating and a stronger sense of connection to locally-grown food in the students it serves. East Harlem is a neighborhood with limited access to fresh produce, and it has some of the city's highest levels of poverty and obesity.

"Showing that we care about the school environment makes a huge morale difference," says Mirem Villamil, the head garden manager at Edible Schoolyard NYC. The program currently supports over 500 pre-kindergarten-through-8th grade students.

The space for school-aged children is also the mission of the Perkins Eastman project at the offices of the I Have A Dream Foundation in Chelsea. Perkins Eastman made the connection to the organization through AIANY, and today, Mindy No, AIA, an associate principal at the firm, is leading a team of volunteers in preparing a bright, turquoise-colored lounge area for middle-school-aged students. A library for kindergarteners, located down a short hallway from the lounge area, is being painted a bright yellow, with one wall designated as a writable chalkboard. Before the Perkins Eastman initiative, the organization's offices hadn't been renovated for 20 years.

The I Have A Dream Foundation works with students from low-income communities to provide academic support and mentorship throughout the students' academic careers, from no later than third grade all the way through college. If students complete the organization's curriculum and decide to pursue higher education or trade school, their tuition will be paid for.

Of I Have A Dream Foundation, No says, “It goes beyond just the educational part. It’s actually a resource for [students] to come and hang out and also feel supported and feel safe.” Perkins Eastman took care to incorporate the organization’s existing branding throughout the renovated spaces, utilizing pockets of orange and the bold turquoise blue.

The need for civic engagement

Farther north, in the neighborhood of Washington Heights, Heidi Blau, FAIA, is handing out watermelons to a line snaking around a block containing a public housing project. Blau, a partner at New York firm FXCollaborative, is spearheading a group of nine volunteers partnering with City Harvest, an organization that will “rescue” an estimated 61 million pounds of food from around the city this year and deliver it to hundreds of food pantries and soup kitchens throughout the five boroughs. On this particular day, the organization is running a mobile market out of the back of a truck.

“There [is] obviously a huge need for fresh food in the city,” says Blau. “It was eye-opening to see how much of a need there is, for those of us that just go about our daily routines. We understand it, but putting a human face to it really is powerful.”

Blau, whose 40-year-old firm has worked on the Second Avenue Subway and Lincoln Center, among other high-profile projects, says that public service has always been an integral value at FXCollaborative. “It’s part of our DNA of who we are, that we are civically engaged,” she says. “I would love to see more people get involved with local chapters, doing these kinds of projects.”

All told, six volunteer teams completed six projects for the 2018 Day of Service. While the day of volunteer service held in conjunction with the Conference on Architecture is usually sponsored and coordinated by AEC Cares, a philanthropic arm of construction software company ConstructConnect, and has been held on the day before the conference begins since 2011, AEC Cares found that New York wasn’t conducive to the kind of big, centralized project that the organization has sponsored in the past. They handed the reigns to AIANY, which put out a call to members to organize projects that would benefit community organizations, nonprofits, and charities throughout the five boroughs.

“It was a model that worked really well,” says Benjamin Prosky, executive director of AIANY. “We had a lot of satisfaction from the volunteers and the organizations that we worked with. It allowed us to establish a group of volunteers that were already primed.” AIANY plans to coordinate an annual Day of Service in the future, with the hope of fostering a strong community of architects who are dedicated to using their skills to help the city’s most vulnerable populations.

