



## Andrew Franz Architect redesigns East Harlem Community Center

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Manhattan, NY Reflecting the firm's continued expansion into commissions for cultural, institutional and multifamily residential markets, Andrew Franz Architect has been engaged for a second time by Union Settlement—one of the nation's oldest community organizations, founded in 1895—to design a major renovation of the Washington Houses Community Center, an 11,000 s/f, one-story facility with multiple uses located in the East Harlem neighborhood.

Having been previously tapped to renovate a group of classrooms inside another one of Union Settlement's main buildings, Andrew Franz's latest scope of work for the organization includes a comprehensive revamp of the entire Washington Houses facility: Reconfiguring and modernizing all rooms and offices, updating restrooms, public spaces and building systems and installing cost effective, sustainable updates to windows and interior finishes. The proposed renovations are being funded through the Criminal Justice Investment Initiative of the Manhattan District Attorney's Office.

Rejecting the notion that a limited budget means limited design, the firm has decided to focus on creating a few select high-impact design-first moments throughout the building that will solidify it as a distinctive, inspiring and lasting piece of architecture for the multiple communities that it serves. "On a visit to the Washington Houses today, it's impossible not to feel enthusiastic about the spirit of the place—a joyful, encouraging, and empowering environment that provides many fun and creative learning and development activities for its users of all ages," said firm principal Andrew Franz, AIA, LEED AP. "As architects, our goal is to make the spaces reflect that energy spaces where people will want to spend time, spaces that instill pride, and spaces that can inspire a sense of ownership in the community while functionally supporting Union Settlement's important programming."

Offering a variety of education, wellness, and community-building resources, the Washington Houses Community Center supports a wide range of youth services programs and houses a robust senior center. Within the largescale renovation, Franz's team will reorganize and transform a number of key spaces that will "Significantly enhance a person's experience of visiting and using the facilities." These key spaces include an enlarged and relocated glass-enclosed entrance that allows passersby to see into the building and community areas; new expanded reception and waiting areas full of natural daylight; efficient circulation routes with inbuilt sections of glass, allowing for views

between key programs; and a fully upgraded seniors center that offers bigger windows and an enhanced connection to the outdoors.

Overall, the architects plan to introduce more daylight and better acoustics throughout the building's interiors and create greater visibility between circulation and program spaces. The goal, according to the project team, is to encourage a sense of connection between community members and staff. "Reconfiguring and relocating the entrance as a gracious and transparent connection to the community will let the center communicate a more open invitation to the neighborhood," said Franz. "We are confident that the appropriate balance between welcoming and secure can be achieved throughout the project."

## Youth Opportunity Hub

Built over 60 years ago, and owned by the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA), the Washington Houses Community Center is one of the main locations for Union Settlement's Youth Services programming, which includes afterschool and summer activities, college preparation, job training and support for disconnected youth. The building is the seat of the

East Harlem Youth Opportunity Hub—a collaborative effort among more than 20 community partners that seeks to provide comprehensive support for at-risk children, teens, and young adults to prevent them from becoming involved in the criminal justice system.

The 1960s-era building presents the architects with several infrastructural challenges in terms of systems upgrades. Due to the facility's low ceiling height, integration of new HVAC systems (to replace window units) will demand creativity. Similarly, the thin plaster walls make electrical distribution a complex puzzle to solve. Franz notes that, together with window replacements and exterior repairs, the infrastructural challenges will require a significant portion of the budget—but are critically important in order to produce a comfortable and functional environment long term.

To maximize the impact of the remaining budget for creating visually strong design moments, Franz and his team plan to expose and polish existing concrete floors and introduce the use of economical and durable materials like plywood and cork throughout—using them in unexpected ways to reinforce the community center's eclectic and vibrant culture. The design team will further enliven the interior with a unique color palette that plays off existing murals and use a combination of natural and artificial lighting sources to brighten the space. Strategic wayfinding and graphic design elements will also serve to unify the building's design.

"The revitalization the Washington Houses is an exciting opportunity for Union Settlement to renew its impact on the lives of East Harlem's youth and to strengthen its connections with the broader community that it serves," said Franz. "We are proud to again partner with this impactful institution on this uplifting project."