



Urbahn Architects donates design and construction services

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Brooklyn, NY Urbahn Architects, a firm that built its practice on serving organizations that engage the public, has once again answered the call to donate their time and talent by participating in the AIA New York's (AIANY) 2020 Day of Service. The initiative encourages architects to make a difference at the local level by partnering with non-profit organizations to bring fresh design ideas into their existing facilities.

This year, Urbahn assembled a team of 40 people among its staff, including 10 designers and 30 construction volunteers, to enliven an entrance passage and recreation space at the Clay St. Men's Assessment Center in the Greenpoint neighborhood, a facility operated by the Bowery Residents' Committee (BRC).

The Assessment Center, a 200-bed shelter, serves as the first point of contact for men over the age of 18 who have recently become homeless. The Center also supports a special initiative to serve the needs of the local street homeless.

"As architects, we are fortunate to be able to help improve people's environments and even their lives in meaningful ways. Most of our staff was attracted to Urbahn because of the firm's history of designing projects in the public realm in and around New York City. We see Day of Service as an opportunity to get one step closer to the people we serve by not only designing a transformative space, but by building it as well," said Natale Barranco, AIA, LEED AP, principal, Urbahn Architects.

The annual Day of Service program, initiated by AIANY in 2018, offers a framework for groups of volunteers to help non-profit organizations with much-needed upgrades to their facilities or assistance with their mission. The projects are kept to a small scale so that installation can be completed in one day utilizing donated materials. Each project is led by a different team of architects and supported by multiple partners and donors.

Urbahn previously participated in the Day of Service program in 2019, when they renovated a rooftop space at another BRC property, the Lexington Avenue Women's Residence in Brooklyn's Bedford-Stuyvesant section. The successful completion of that project, which created an attractive, welcoming outdoor respite for residents, provided the impetus to continue the firm's participation in 2020.

“Once again, the team from Urbahn outdid themselves with the AIA Day of Service project. As a result of their tireless efforts, we now have a vibrant and welcoming entry courtyard that provides shelter and opportunities for recreation for 200 residents of our Assessment Center in Brooklyn. Over the course of five months, the team worked tirelessly to design and prepare for the AIA Day of Service, including securing donations and engaging volunteers. The result is beyond anything we imagined, and greatly improves the quality of the place these men temporarily call home. Thank you Urbahn!” said Daughtry Carstarphen, AIA, vice president for capital projects at BRC.

The Urbahn team faced several challenges in upgrading the outdoor space at the Men’s Assessment Center. The shelter occupies a converted early twentieth-century brick warehouse building and covers the majority of the property. At the east side of the building, a 20-ft. wide lot with a single vehicle garage at the front lot line provides the only open space and serves as both the Center’s main entrance and a recreation area for residents. From the street, a seven-foot wide passageway leads past the garage to a 20-ft.by 60-ft. open yard facing the building entrance. Surrounded on the east and south sides by chain link fencing that divides the property from neighboring parking lots, and framed by the Center on the west side, the empty concrete paved space was uninviting and did not convey the positive image that BRC wanted to impart on its residents and visitors.

The Urbahn team took on the challenge of designing and building upgrades that would transform the space.

The designers met with the client to set expectations for the project and held design charettes to discuss options and logistics in the weeks leading up to the Day of Service. Architect Oni Lloyd, RA led the Urbahn team. “BRC desired a joyful shaded space that would provide clearly delineated areas for entry and recreation,” Lloyd said. “Working within a limited budget, the Urbahn team designed and painted a complex geometric mural consisting of multi-colored triangles and trapezoids in ten vivid colors on both the concrete pavement and the garage walls. The mural instantly brightened the space and defined its uses.”

The mural creates a path from the street through the passage and into the yard. It then splits to direct visitors either to the building entrance or to the newly defined recreation and seating areas. In the passage, the pattern spills from the pathway onto the building wall and continues up to a height of 15 ft. above the concrete, adding an element of whimsy. A solid chartreuse ‘floor’ defines the recreation area, which can be used for both individual and group activities.

To shield the seating area from the sun, Urbahn worked with Forte Construction Co., the project’s volunteer general contractor, to install triangular fabric shade “sails,” manufactured by Coolaroo, in a brilliant blue color that matches a tone used in the mural. The sails are attached at their corners with turnbuckle and eye hardware to both the building wall and to the tops of stainless-steel tubes set in 2-foot diameter concrete filled sonotubes. The team installed wood slat benches to provide seating under the sails and along the perimeter of the exercise area. That same wood slat material was

used to enclose the lower section of the sonotubes and to create planters that were filled with greenery to soften the space.

The project was made possible by generous donations from several contractors and suppliers including: New York Digital (lighting fixtures); Forte Construction (wood, concrete, post, and labor); TAP Electrical Contracting (labor to install lighting fixtures); Tape Jungle (painters tape); Uline (smokers receptacles); BluEdge (signage); Wallauer Paint & Design (roll on paint, rollers, and trays); Coolaroo (sail shades and hardware); Ocean Wholesale Nursery (plants). Urbahn donated spray paint for the mural, as well as soil, tape, tools, and protective gear. And finally, AIANY donated artificial turf and plants, stones, a picnic table and lunches to keep the volunteers energized during the long workday.

BRC Assessment Center's users and personnel enthusiastically welcomed the upgrades. In the words of Rick Akin, BRC's director of volunteer services: "Another year and another fantastic project! Urbahn has once again hit the ball out of the park with the AIA Day of Service. What was once an industrial-looking and sterile entrance to the Men's Assessment Center is now a colorful, warm, and welcoming space for well-earned downtime, relaxation, exercise, and fresh air. After several months of planning, and the diligence and professionalism of more than 45 volunteers over three weekends, it was so exciting to see the end results. We, and, more importantly, the clients we serve, are thrilled. We look forward to a continued partnership with Urbahn in the years to come."

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