



Executive of the Month: A Q&A with Magnusson Architecture and Planning's newest principal, Brian Loughlin

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Brian Loughlin

An expert, and advocate for equitable housing, planning and community development, Brian Loughlin is also an adjunct associate professor of Architecture and Real Estate Development at Columbia University, chair of the American Planning Association's Housing and Community Development Division and co-chair of AIANY's Housing Committee. In this Question & Answer he weighs in on some of the biggest challenges facing our local housing industry.

You are the newest principal at Magnusson Architecture and Planning (MAP), can you tell us a little

about the firm and your role there?

We're a mid-sized firm which got its start in the Bronx over thirty-five years ago developing a community-driven masterplan for the Melrose neighborhood. Since then, we have designed over one-hundred buildings with more than 13,000 units of housing – affordable across a range of income tiers – throughout the five boroughs, and beyond.

MAP has emerged as a leading residential architecture firm, particularly because of our award-winning designs and focus on sustainability, but at our core there is a concern for neighborhoods and the people who live there. There is no other typology that has a bigger impact on the make-up of our cities and communities, than housing. And the thing that has the biggest effect on a person's life is the community they live in. So, we always try to explore the connection between housing and community.

At MAP, I'm sort of the advance team. I have the privilege of working with clients, communities, and organizations to try and understand who they are, what they do, who they serve, why they have certain goals or missions, all to help them articulate their vision through the built environment. To listen and to ask, "how can we help you create the space you need to do the amazing work you do?" That could be the outline for a neighborhood masterplan, defining the program for a new building or renovation, or helping them achieve a better appreciation for the space they already have.

We hear a lot about the connections between housing and health, can you give some examples of how resident health is playing a larger role in design?

I'm glad you asked this question; we really need to think about this as community health and not just resident health. Ten years ago, Superstorm Sandy paralyzed our city and devastated many of our poorest neighborhoods. The design, planning, and development communities mobilized around issues of sustainability and resiliency in a way that was awe-inspiring and made me proud to be an architect and a planner. Much of the groundwork had been laid beforehand, but that was the pivotal moment that got everyone to realize that we can no longer afford to do nothing.

The Rise - Brooklyn, NY

Similarly, the Coronavirus pandemic took many things away, but what it gave us was the shared understanding of the direct connection between our homes, our communities, and our health. Research already demonstrated that our built environment is critical to the social determinants of health, programs like Fitwell had emerged, and initiatives like HCR's Vital Brooklyn were underway. But we will look back on this as the tipping point.

The Rise, currently in construction, is part of Vital Brooklyn, and focuses on the connection between community health, resident health, and the built environment. Collaborating with the Women's Prison Association, Osborne, Project Eats, Xenolith Partners, and the Brownsville Community Land

Trust, MAP designed a building that will provide housing that's affordable to women, and men, affected by the criminal justice system. Physical and visual connections to outdoor space were prioritized throughout the building, and we utilized principles of trauma-informed design to support residents as they reconnect to friends and family. In a neighborhood with one of the highest incarceration rates in the country, using collaborative processes to create spaces that promote health, and foster connections between residents and their community –which has been proven to significantly reduce recidivism – is the healthiest outcome we could hope for.

MAP is involved in public housing work, both renovation and new construction, what do you see as the future of public housing?

As an architect, a modernist, and above all, a houser, I hold public housing very close to my heart. I was privileged to spend fifteen years working in PHAs for people who called our public housing communities their 'home'. From Catherine Bauer to Marcia Fudge, I've studied public housing as an outward expression of how we as a country, as a society, as a city, care for some of the most vulnerable among us, and how we regard our collective responsibility to provide everyone with a decent and nourishing place to live. For me, that experience elicits a profound sense that we need to get public housing right.

Sol on Park at NYHCA's Morris Houses - Bronx, NY

One of our newest designs, Sol on Park, is a 200-unit mixed-use building, 100% affordable to older adults at NYCHA's Morris Houses in the Bronx. The collaboration with NRP, Foxy Management, and Selfhelp, combines all the things critical to making good housing work: a focus on resident health, an emphasis on sustainability, a celebration of beautiful design that instills a pride of place, and a relationship to neighborhood and community through open space, and health-related services that will foster social and cultural connections. As we say about this development, "health is housing, and housing is health".

Long before we were awarded this site, the city developed a series of programs that would take underutilized land on NYCHA properties and create opportunities for usable open space, well-designed affordable housing, and community-based programming. That is a vision for the future of public housing that MAP is proud to be a part of.

As co-chair of the AIANY's Housing Committee, you helped to organize "NYC's Housing Crisis" conference last spring. What are some of the big picture things people need to understand about housing in the New York Metropolitan area?

This is the worst housing crisis in the city's history. There are differences in opinion as to what got us here and varying estimates as to how many housing units we need, but acknowledgment that this is a "crisis" has become universal. Use of that term is important because it means we need everyone's participation, and we need to consider every possible solution.

We can't solve the housing crisis by just doing more of the same things. We can't just rely on spending more, we also need to rethink the economics of housing delivery; we can't simply build more, we also need to rethink how housing is designed; and we can't just increase entitlements, we also need to reimagine zoning. We need systemic change.

But, we need to make sure the word "crisis" doesn't justify doing less. We still need to protect quality of life for residents and ignore the inevitable calls to lower ceiling heights, shrink apartment sizes, eliminate light and air requirements or otherwise waive minimum dwelling standards to get more units. Similarly, we have a responsibility to use this opportunity to work toward climate justice and housing justice, not one at the expense of the other.

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