

# City Seeking Rich Designs Instead of the Lowest Bids

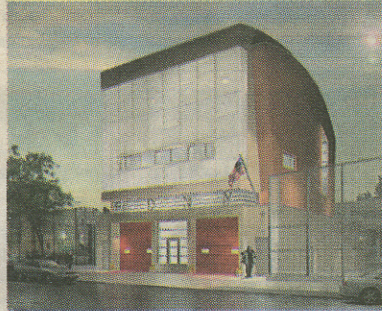
By ROBIN POGREBIN

It is still business as usual at the city's Department of Design and Construction. The agency remains in cavernous headquarters in what feels like the middle of nowhere in Long Island City, Queens. It continues to be determined to have the city's capital projects built on schedule and on budget.

But a new spirit is also informing the agency: a quickened interest in quality design.

Two rosters of approved architects have been drafted for city projects — a list of 24 for projects costing up to \$10 million and one of 8 for plans with larger budgets (including prominent firms like Rafael Viñoly Architects, Arquitectonica and Polshek Partnership). Many, like Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, 1100 Architect and Gluckman Mayner Architects, have never done work for the department before.

Unlike architects used by the city in the past, they were selected primarily for the quality of their work rather than the competitiveness of their bids. Peer reviews in which outside architects subject designs to a rigorous critique used to be held only occasionally at the department; now they are an integral part of the development process and have been



Scott J. Vautrin/STV

A rendering of STV Inc.'s prize-winning design for a new firehouse in Bushwick, Brooklyn.

adopted by other agencies that oversee capital projects, like the Parks Department. Five design liaisons are now staff members of the design department, which for the first time in its history is being run by an architect, David J. Burney, who took over as commissioner in January 2004.

As a result, the city firehouses, courts, libraries and police stations that in recent decades were considered low-end, unglamorous assignments are now attracting a greater number of prominent architects. "It's definitely a new ballgame now, and I'm very excited about it," said David W. Prendergast of Prendergast Laurel Architects, which has de-

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# City Seeking Rich Design, Not Low Bids

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signed a public library in the Kingsbridge section of the Bronx for the city.

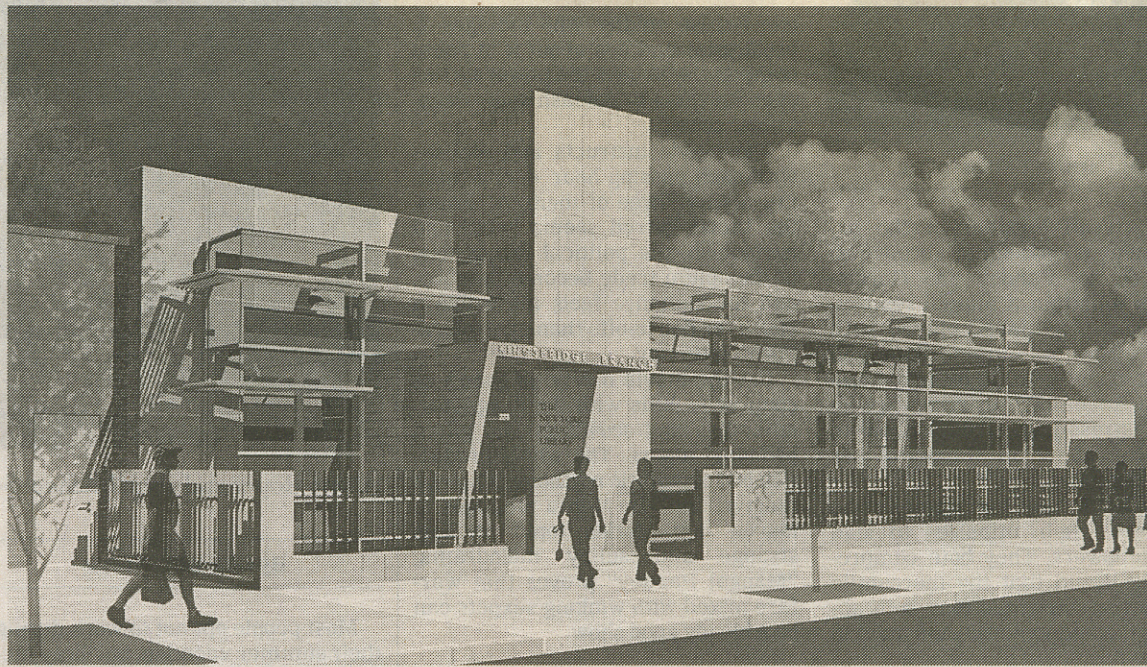
That there is a list of preferred architects might seem constrictive for some city institutions. But Mr. Burney emphasized that nonlisted architects could still be hired. Using the roster simply streamlines the process, because the architects have already been approved.

Frederic M. Bell, a former assistant commissioner at the agency who is now executive director of the New York chapter of the American Institute of Architects, credited Mr. Burney with fostering a creative climate at the department. "He's created an atmosphere where design matters and is not just an afterthought," he said, "bringing premier talent in the city to public commissions, working with smaller and design-oriented firms."

This new emphasis on architecture, design professionals say, comes from the top: Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg has made clear his interest in art and aesthetics, a position that has influenced the City Planning Department and the Art Commission, the city's design review agency. In July 2004, the mayor announced a "design and construction excellence initiative" for city agencies that established new ways of selecting and contracting with architects and design consultants to emphasize quality and talent.

"Our public works program should reflect New York City's status as a world-class city with projects that embody the highest standards in contemporary architectural and engineering design while respecting our city's historical context," Mr. Bloomberg said in his letter to agency commissioners last July.

Kate D. Levin, the cultural affairs commissioner, said the department's new standards had forced cultural organizations to aim higher with their capital projects. The Public Theater in the East Village, for example, which plans to build an ambitious new lobby and entrance, is considering Polshek for the project. Ms. Levin also cited the redesign of the Brooklyn Children's Museum in Crown Heights. The initiative's emphasis on partnership allows disagreements between the architects and construction management to be resolved through a team approach that includes museum officials.



Prendergast Laure

A rendering of Prendergast Laurel's award-winning design for the new Kingsbridge library. It was commissioned by the design agency, led by David J. Burney, right.

"Lifting the bar on everything is putting really constructive pressure on all the players to have a better understanding of what they want to achieve," Ms. Levin said. "It's a 360-degree mandate from City Hall to look at how to make the end result better in every way."

Some architects might not be excited by the department's bread-and-butter projects, like pedestrian bridges, storm-water systems and recreation centers. But Mr. Burney insisted that the department could make a big impact on the city. "When you look at how much of infrastructure is publicly funded," he said, "it's a real legacy that you're leaving."

In the past, routine acceptance of the lowest competitive bid forced architects and designers into a fee competition. "A lot of firms wouldn't even participate in city work," Mr. Burney said.

Now the city has set a predetermined fee range for all services provided under a contract. The rosters of architects selected by the department submit proposals for specific projects. All firms are removed from the list after two years to make room for others, although architects can reapply.

Bruce S. Fowle of Fox & Fowle Architects, which is on the shortlist for bigger projects, said his firm had had a much better experience dealing with the design department under the new system. "It was difficult for us to compete on a fee basis," he said. "Now the evaluations are based more on qualifications. It's become



Chester Higgins Jr./The New York Times

much more appealing to us. We knew we were competing against people equally qualified."

Fox & Fowle is currently working on a new conservation center for the Bronx Zoo. "It's been going very well," Mr. Fowle said, adding, "You sense there is a culture of design excellence, which is not something you ever sensed before."

Architects who had never contracted for a department project suddenly want to work on one, people in the industry say. Of the 171 proposals the agency received for the smaller projects in the summer of 2004, 160 were from firms that had not done business with it before, the department said. (From that pool, 24 were selected.) For the large projects, the department received 137 proposals, of which 99 were from firms that had never previously contracted with the agency. (Eight were selected.)

Among the projects in the works are an expansion of the Queens Museum of Art (the team of Grimshaw Architects and Ammann & Whitney); a new Remsen Avenue repair facility in Canarsie, Brooklyn, for the Department of Environmental Pro-

tection (Kiss & Cathcart); a homeless center (Polshek & Partners).

Every year the Art Commission gives out awards to distinguished projects on city land. Of the 2004 winners, six were commissioned by the Department of Design and Construction.

They included the new Kingsbridge library branch on West 222nd Street in the Bronx; a redesign of the Harriet Tubman Memorial Library at Frederick Douglass Boulevard and West 122nd Street in Harlem; the renovation of the Ladd-Peterson Company 277 and Ladd-Peterson 112 building at Knickerbocker Avenue in Bushwick, Brooklyn; the reconstruction of the Louise S. Platter Plaza at Liberty Street, Street and Maiden Lane in Manhattan. All of the design projects are on view through Aug. 28 at the City of New York Department of Design and Construction on LaGuardia Place in Greenwich Village.

At a recent peer review session, a new Glen Oaks Library in Queens was one of the two architects chosen for the project. Fairbanks and Scott Marble sent their plans to other architects and design department staff members. The existing library, on Turnpike, is to be demolished and replaced by an 18,000-square-foot, environmentally advanced building. Experts in the room questioned whether the new glass and mesh design needed to be more fully developed and whether the proposed grass roof would be as feasible logistically as it was aesthetically pleasing.

Jean Phifer, an architect who attended the session, said the library was "really beautiful."

"It has that interesting tension between the urban and the suburban," she said.

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