

# The Sun

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## HOME



## Shaping Communities Through Smart Design

*For Amie Gross, Architecture Is Both Personal and Political*

By SARAH KARNASIEWICZ

**A**s a young girl growing up in New York City, Amie Gross was fascinated by construction sites. "I loved it when my mother would lift me up by the arms so I could peek over the safety barriers," she said. These days, after 20 years as president and founder of Amie Gross Architects, Ms. Gross usually finds herself on the other side of the construction fence.

Despite her precocious passion for building, Ms. Gross did not always aim to be an architect. As an undergraduate, she enrolled in Washington University's fine arts program. "For years I thought I was going to be a sculptor," she said. "But I came from a very socially active family and it was too hard to practice my politics through art. Lucky for me, the architecture department was right next door, and after 15 minutes in a class I knew that was what I was going to do."

Ms. Gross has devoted her architectural career to shaping communities through intelligent design and responsible urban planning. "I gear everything I do around the belief that architecture can improve people's lives and make neighborhoods stronger," she said.



Ms. Gross graduated from college in 1975 determined to eventually start her own company. "I knew that if I wanted to last, I first needed to acquire a range of experiences," she said. She went on to work for a number of notable architectural firms, including Cambridge Seven Associates, Walker Group/CNI, and the New York City Department of Housing and Preservation, building both public and private facilities.

Though Ms. Gross was interested in work with a social agenda, she was practical about the financial demands of running a private business. Over the past 30 years, she has built offices and community centers, spas, retail stores, and subsidized housing, with budgets ranging from \$1 million to \$23 million.

In 1985, when she founded Amie Gross Architects, her first client was Circuit City. The store prototype that Ms. Gross designed has now become a fixture of shopping centers nationwide. "It was 'crazy,'" she said. "Because of that project, in the space of a month, my tiny firm went from a staff of five to a staff of 30. Now wherever we drive in the country, my kids point out every Circuit City and say, 'Hey, there's Mom's building!'"

The income and experience she gained from the Circuit City assignment allowed Ms. Gross the freedom to devote more of her talent to social causes. Fifteen years ago, in cooperation with the nonprofit group Community Access, Ms. Gross designed an apartment building on East 4th Street in Manhattan to serve low-income, psychiatrically disabled, and formerly homeless residents. "My friends call it the house that Circuit City built," Ms. Gross said with a smile.

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AMIE GROSS ARCHITECTS



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Ms. Gross's hallmark. "The problem with so much assisted housing in the past was that it resulted in closed little ghettos," said Ms. Gross. "But by promoting a diverse population, you can create a more normalized setting for the building inhabitants."

Ms. Gross's experience with commercial and retail design continues to "pollinate" her nonprofit work ideologically as well as financially. A resident of Battery Park City herself, she is sensitive to the needs of urban communities — and understands that those needs involve more than simply residential housing. When she worked as a designer for the Department of Housing and Preservation during Mayor Koch's administration, Ms. Gross was frustrated by projects that did not consider the context of the neighborhood. "We would build people housing, but there were still no supermarkets, no local job training, no childcare. There is something wrong when poor people have to spend money hiring a car service to go to the grocery store," she said.

Though zoning regulations are often a hindrance, Ms. Gross promotes design strategies that integrate a variety of support services into the structure of residential properties. One recent example is East New York's Genesis Neighborhood Plaza, which Ms. Gross designed for Help USA, a national nonprofit group serving the homeless. A four-phase project encompassing an entire 500-by-100-foot city block, Genesis boasts not only a range of residential units, including studios and one- and two-bedroom apartments, but also an on-site health clinic, a computer and job training center, childcare facilities, a gymnasium, retail stores, a supermarket, and a bright and inviting landscaped garden. When Phase 1 opened two years ago there were more than 1,500 applications for the first 52 apartments. Phase 2 is scheduled to begin construction shortly.

Now, after years spent sculpting communities through smart design, Ms. Gross has extended her focus to include city planning and policy. She is one of a group of influential architectural professionals who, in cooperation with Baruch College's Newman Real Estate Institute, have been selected by New York's public advocate, Betsy Gotbaum, to study the state of affordable housing in the city.

"The amazing thing is that so many of the problems we face in housing now are identical to the problems we were dealing with 100 years ago," Ms. Gross said. "We have huge influxes of immigrants moving into neighborhoods that lack facilities to serve them. As the city grows, we have to adapt to meet the expectations of the new population. It's a very exciting time."

Ms. Gross has seen from experience the ways in which successful architectural projects can stabilize fledgling communities and is hopeful that the Baruch team's findings will prove instrumental in establishing new standards for residential planning. As the demand for affordable housing pushes the city further into outer-borough development and the redevelopment of abandoned or unused commercial sites, it is more essential than ever that new neighborhoods be approached with an intelligent, sustainable eye on the future. "This is not just an issue for the poor," Ms. Gross said. "Everyone wants to be part of a community. No one wants to be alone."

**BETTER LIVING** Top, an architectural rendering of Genesis Neighborhood Plaza in East New York; middle, Amie Gross; above, an entryway at Genesis.