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Laurie Hawkinson and the Art of Urban Architecture

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The modern loft-style office fills an upper floor in a nondescript building on Canal Street, on the fringe of New York's Chinatown. Accessible by a 100-year-old hand-operated Otis elevator, the high-ceilinged room hums with the quiet murmur of a half-dozen architects. This is where Laurie Hawkinson, an associate professor of architecture at Columbia's Graduate School of Architecture, Planning, and Preservation, works in private practice. Along with her partner and husband, Henry Smith-Miller, she is involved in a pair of projects, one near the World Trade Center site and one in Queens, that aim to have a lasting impact on New York City.

Their firm, Smith-Miller+Hawkinson Architects, recently completed a strategic open-space study of 100-plus acres in New York's financial district for the Lower Manhattan Develop-ment Corporation, the agency overseeing the reconstruction of the World Trade Center site. Even before 9/11, this area around Wall Street was long reputed as a place where the sidewalks rolled up at the end of the workday. But revitalization efforts have amplified the opportunity to enhance the neighborhood for both workers and the residents expected to move to the area in coming years, as thousands of new apartments are created in former office buildings.

"You can't just drop that housing into a vacuum. You need infrastructure," Hawkinson says. "Part of what we're doing is looking at where you can find open space in these areas. Just having it at the edges, along the rivers, is not enough."

Armed with layers of data showing where pedestrians exit the subway and move along downtown's narrow thoroughfares, Hawkinson and her colleagues identified what she calls pocket opportunities to relieve pressure on the street. If planners are

thoughtful about designing infrastructure on an intimate scale, she says, these small parcels of open land can give people a chance to “slow down, take stock, pause.”

“We made a kind of a Nolli plan, like they did in Rome, of all the public open spaces,” including those indoors, Hawkinson explains. “We’re showing all the interior spaces that you can go through downtown, as a network,” she adds, tracing a finger over a map of downtown. “We’re trying to identify all the underground access, to see how people are flowing through this network.” The plan, which has already received a Progressive Architecture Award from *Architecture* magazine, is grounded in shoe leather as much as maps and tables: “You have to keep walking out there,” Hawkinson says.

An even larger potential project is Hawkinson’s work for the City’s bid for the 2012 Olympic Games. Preliminary plans call for an Olympic village, the area where athletes live, on a 40-acre site on the Queens side of the East River, just across from midtown Manhattan. Hawkinson’s firm is one of five international finalists that have submitted designs for the Olympic Village Design Study. They are working with a housing specialist, landscape architects, and other consultants. Ordinarily, such a major project would be built in phases, but with the Olympics driving the timetable, 4,500 units of housing must be completed all at once, along with the infrastructure.

After the Olympics, the complex would be repurposed. The athletes’ housing would become private apartments. A cafeteria could become a community center. Roads, parking, retail space, and an Olympic green twice the size of Bryant Park—all legacies for the community after the Games’ conclusion. However, Hawkinson acknowledges that it is a long shot that the design will be realized. After all, even if her team wins the competition, New York still has to land the Olympics for the complex to be built.

Informing these and other projects is a strategy for considering architectural problems. Hawkinson is intrigued by “contemporary culture and how that can be made physical, somehow, through architectural thinking about space. One of the ways we’ve been thinking about the Olympic village and downtown Manhattan is, rather than designing something from a plan—being in a helicopter looking down—we’re trying to take the perspective of someone on the ground. The public realm is very diverse and multi-layered—it extends to subway platforms, to the level of the street, to elevated surfaces like Chase Manhattan Plaza. To think of space as flat is not to think of the space we inhabit in the public realm—space that has a lot of

infrastructure in it and a lot of life.”

Hawkinson also addresses design problems using new technologies and innovative materials. For the Queens project, she is working with consultants to explore the use of thermal piles and other environmentally friendly ways to supplement building systems. She says elements like geotextiles—fabrics used to hold soil and grass—on a building’s roof, for example, can help to retain heat. “Improved computational technology allows for multidisciplinary advances in the way we think about mechanical, environmental, and structural systems in buildings and communities,” she adds.

The ferry terminal the firm designed for New York City’s Pier 11, near Wall Street, reflects this primacy of materials. Com-pleted in 2000, the handsome structure features glass, translucent fiberglass, and exposed steel, and has a 48-foot-long airplane-hangar door that can be opened in good weather to blur the line between inside and outside. “We tried to make the building surprising,” Hawkinson says, “and take in more space” than it actually occupies. Writing in *The New Yorker*, architecture critic Paul Goldberger praised the design, calling it “one of the most refreshing public buildings to have gone up on the waterfront in years.”

“They did a great job,” agrees Eve Michel, a senior vice president at the New York City Economic Development Corporation, who hired Smith-Miller+Hawkinson to design the ferry terminal. She adds that the look of this terminal has influenced piers built elsewhere along the East River as well as the small terminal at 34th Street, resulting in an appealing continuity along the waterfront.

Hawkinson’s designs build on her background in fine arts. When she enrolled in the bachelor’s program in architecture at Cooper Union (where she studied under Bernard Tschumi and others), she already had a BA and an MA in fine arts from Berkeley. A talented sculptor, she had first come to New York for a fellowship at the Whitney Museum’s independent study program to explore her interest in site-specific sculpture. She was drawn to “art that had some kind of a dialogue about its location, its space.” Hawkinson says that she thought studying architecture would simply give her more material for the art she was creating. “I had no idea I was going to become an architect. But you see the world differently once you go through an architecture program.”

Now Hawkinson has been in private practice for 20 years and has taught full-time at Columbia for more than half that time, engaging in an ongoing dialogue with students—about materials, about space, about the pressing problems of design. Her current students are tackling a new model for housing in Las Vegas, addressing whether new strategies about infrastructure, good design, and innovative materials can combat urban sprawl and its associated ills.

“If we don’t think about these issues here in the University—if we don’t do it—who’s going to make this proposition?” she asks. “To be an architect is to be optimistic. You’re planning now for the future—you want to make sure you’re thinking forward.”

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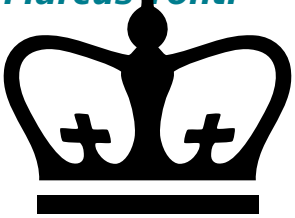

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