

Confronting the Complexities of Urban Design

BY JUDY H. WATTS

As principal and founder of Amie Gross Architects, alumna Amie Gross works closely with every client to understand the client, the issues surrounding the assignment, and what will give each project "its identity in the landscape."



Norman McGrath

The Shared Entry Building (above) and a recreational fountain (right) are part of Phase I construction of the Genesis Neighborhood Plaza (master plan by Amie Gross Architects).



Jennifer Weisbord



Norman McGrath

The daughter of politically active parents, Gross has given AGA a socially conscious focus on emerging and growing neighborhoods. Stirrings of social concern began in early grade school, when her mother took her to see a healthy low-income area being decimated to make way for the architecturally significant Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts. Her mother described the plans for the cultural mecca, explaining how exciting it all was, but she added: "They are destroying a neighborhood."

"I began to understand the complexity of urban architecture—that building involves many considerations from a social as well as an urban-design standpoint," Gross says.

Highly innovative responses to a variety of human dilemmas are among AGA's achievements. A striking example is Brooklyn's Genesis Neighborhood Plaza, a four-phase project designed for Help USA, a national provider of housing and services for the homeless. "Before the first funding was even in place, we were hired to see what could be done," Gross says. "Because we could design to the need, we contributed in creating a neighborhood with housing, health care, day care, and retail space."

Ultimately, 121 apartments for low-income and formerly homeless people will be constructed in the Plaza, which was featured in *The New York Times* on August 25, 2000. For Gross, the project is all about community.

"Something has happened to our environments in America," she says. "They are insular, centered on single-family homes. To my mind, regardless of income, people in our country increasingly crave community. They don't want to be alone."

Growing up in an in-your-face town where one constantly confronts "the sheer mass of it all" probably contributed to Gross' self-confidence and success in what has been a largely male profession and in a ferociously competitive environment of just less than 2,000 architectural

Manhattanites—who of necessity probably spend more time walking than residents of any major city in America—have always been accustomed to shopping under scaffolding, watching cranes overhead, and talking through the din of air-hammers, heavy machinery, and shouts. In a city perpetually being built and rebuilt, restored, rehabbed, refaced, and reapportioned, no wonder native Amie Gross, principal at Amie Gross Architects (AGA), is attuned to the built environment and its human ramifications.

For HELP USA, Amie Gross Architects created the master plan for the Genesis Neighborhood Plaza. A four-phase development, the 148,000-square-foot, mixed-use complex incorporates 121 units of housing, 8,000 square feet of retail space, a day-care center, a health clinic, supermarket, and a separate structure containing a community center, in East New York, Brooklyn.



firms. She is very confident and very tough at construction sites (which she likens to the Wild West). “I don’t get pushed around,” she says. “My staff and I know what we are talking about, so we get respect—and we give respect. A lot of people are involved who have different needs, and it’s part of the architect’s job to sort things out.”

At AGA’s midtown headquarters, where award-winning \$500,000-to-\$20 million projects are born, Gross’ approval rating may have been captured in an admiring secretary’s spontaneous comment, “Amie rocks!” Gross works closely with every client to understand the issues, what the client is about, and what will give the particular project “its identity in the landscape.” The design and building process is intensely researched at the mid-sized firm and clearly communicated at every step to the many groups involved, including clients, planning boards, building departments, manufacturers, engineers, and contractors. And AGA’s client list is nearly as diverse as the city setting: It includes local, state, and national not-for-profit organizations and government agencies; developers; corporations; and retailers.

Artfully Finding Architecture

Although Amie Gross always had an acute kinesthetic sense of herself in her surroundings (and of others in their environments), she didn’t find her place in the larger landscape for years. Her mother, an art dealer, groomed her to be visual, choosing their Upper East Side apartment because it was near the Metropolitan Museum of Art. By the time Gross headed for Washington University—convinced she would become a sculptor—she had spent the equivalent of many months at the Met, absorbing the art and artifacts of the centuries.

At Washington U., Gross studied art, “had superb professors,” did very well, and was “very happy.” But the thing was, she considered her sculptures models for 100-foot pieces set in a city square, and was continually caught up in questions such as how people would approach them. Finally—fortunately—a professor said to her, “Maybe you want to be an architect.”

“I realized that I had been doing architecture all along,” she says, “yet becoming an architect had never occurred to me!”

Her mother, who had two daughters, was ecstatic: “Why didn’t I think of that?”

I’d much rather have ‘my daughter, the architect’ than ‘my son, the doctor!’”

After graduating in 1975 with an architecture degree, Gross worked with Boston’s Cambridge Seven Associates until one morning she turned on *Today*, saw the New York City streets, cried with sudden homesickness, and decided to move. In 1984, by now a project director at New York’s Walker Group/CNI (“another wonderful place”), Gross told the president, Kenneth

Walker, she was thinking of starting her own firm. “Try it!” he said. “You can always come back.”


In May 2002, Gross went back to her University foundation when she traveled to St. Louis to accept the architecture school’s Distinguished Alumni Award. She took her two children, son Azra, 12, and daughter Renata, 8 (who names all Gross’ buildings by color). “I was so full of pride returning to my alma mater with them,” she says. “We talked with some of my former professors, and the children went with me to Mr. [Leslie] Laskey’s house. He amazed them with stories about how I wouldn’t listen to him.”

Considering Human Implications

Amie Gross, Azra, and Renata have recently experienced another homecoming: their return to the Battery Park City apartment they left on September 11, 2001. “We lived three blocks from where the world changed,” Gross says simply.

After the disaster, Gross became a community lightning rod for issues related to the environment around Ground Zero. When the Board of Education quickly tried to reopen schools in the area, for example, Gross and other parents were appalled. Concerned about their children’s psychological health and physical safety, they sued, delaying the children from returning to an area with quite questionable air quality.

“The tragedy has so many tentacles,” Gross says. “What about the land? Thousands of people lost their lives there, and finding the right memorial and buildings is the architectural community’s supreme challenge. There are layers of issues—about sacred spaces, about being respectful to the survivors, about dealing with the issues of commerce and the lost tax income for the city. How are we to find a physical form to accommodate those concerns? Each is legitimate in its own way.

“I have a private notebook with my own solutions,” she continues. “Perhaps there will be an open competition for the memorial. *That* I would like to enter.” 

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