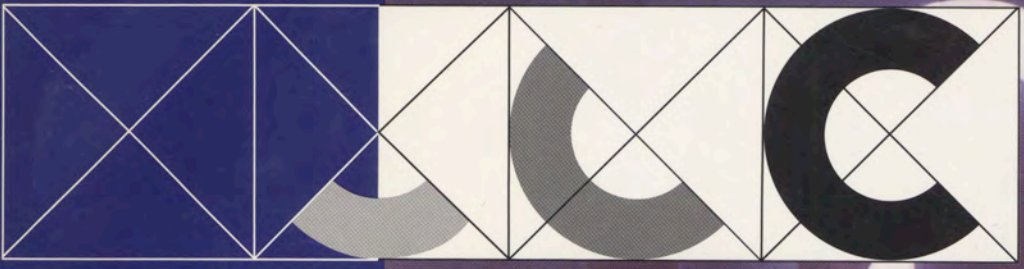


Summer 2004



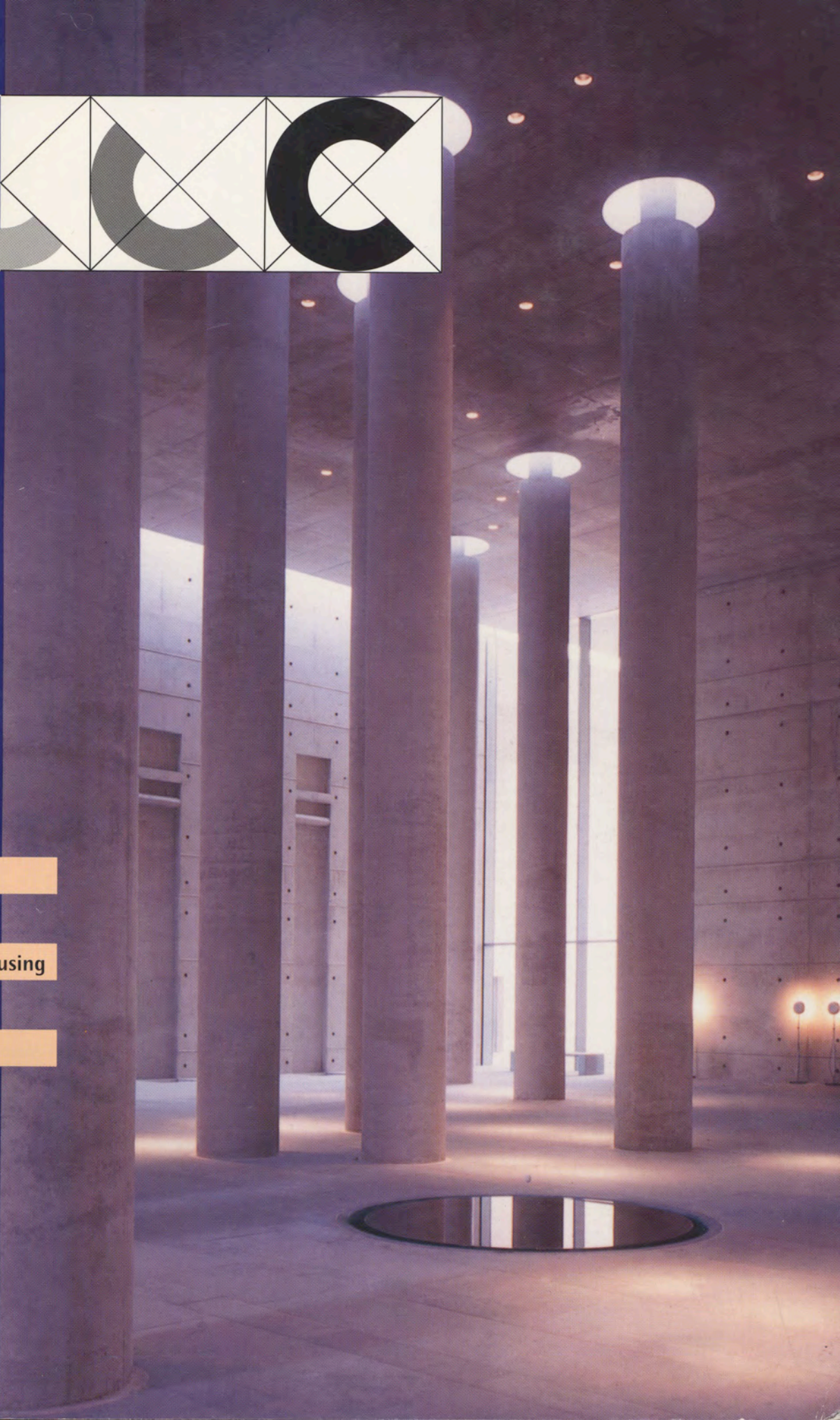
COMPETITIONS

Creating a Sacred Place

California and Denmark Housing

Interview: Caples Jefferson

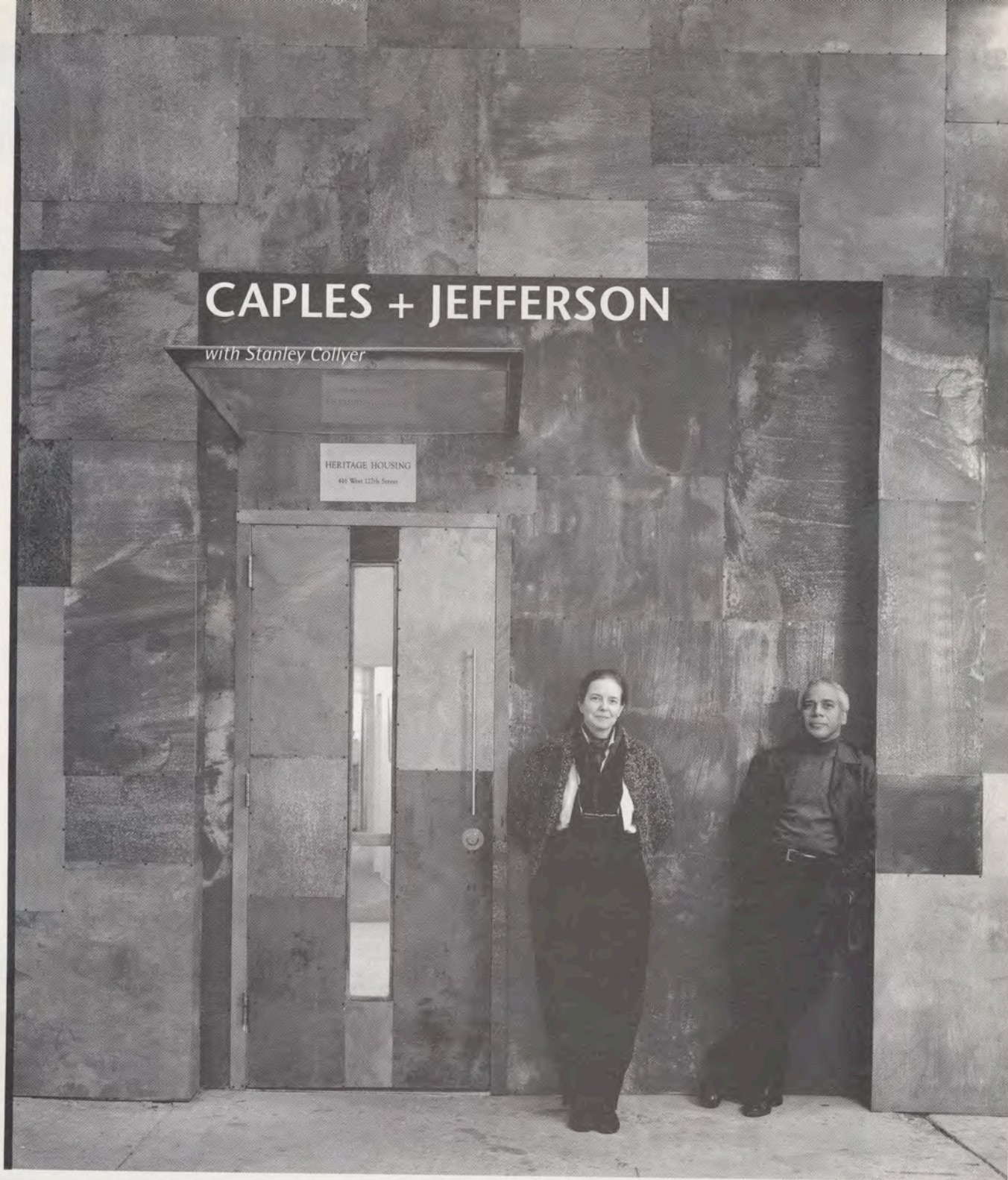
Architecture
Art
Planning



CAPLES + JEFFERSON

with Stanley Collyer

HERITAGE HOUSING
416 West 127th Street



COMPETITIONS: You are involved in a lot of community housing ventures for non-profits. You certainly emphasize the importance of architecture here; but can there be a case —even in the case of such projects — where the project is overdesigned? Where the residents feel constrained in expressing themselves — as if they wouldn't do it anyway? Or are these projects so bare bones that its mostly left up to the community to fill in the details?

CAPLES: For any client, design is 'where to step in, and where to step aside!' With any project at any economic level, you need to allow some space for daily activities and life to take place. I don't think as very carefully designed architecture as being inimical to that. I think it is more a question of thoughtfulness about how those spaces might be occupied. But I don't see it as a question of budget.

I think we spend a great deal of time thinking about activities that might take place in our buildings. So we do try to allow a space to be generous to those activities. But often people are looking to buildings to help organize their activities. So you are looking for the building, or the building and the landscape, to help create an order where different groups have to share spaces. You can set up an order that creates multiple locations where groups can congregate at the same time without impinging on each other. That's using design to organize and leave people room at the same time. That's what I mean by not inimical to activity careful design.

There is another 'too much design' issue which comes into the public works (sector), especially work for low income communities. It's the whole question of materiality. Too many of the environments that exist in these neighborhoods are half-built or falling apart. So materiality becomes a very big issue — the difference between the sort of uptown versus downtown mentality.

JEFFERSON: It's the idea of finished and unfinished. In one of our projects we had a skylight, and we wanted to keep the edges of the skylight rough to reflect the light. The next day I came back to the site and it was finished — sanded smooth. I asked why they did that? 'It was 'unfinished.' 'We are accustomed to unfinished things. I thought you wanted it to be finished.' We realized that it is another world of perception and culture.

CAPLES: We've had quite a few discussions with a number of our clients — on this issue of Uptown versus Downtown. The rich core of Manhattan is Downtown, and the other boroughs perceive themselves as Uptown. They see themselves as different camps. Downtown, according to our Uptown clients, is all dressed in black, cool, and grey, and the fascination with the 'rough.' Uptown is more vibrant and more colorful; but they have seen enough of unfinished concrete, graffiti and chain link for an eternity, and they want to see something else.

While we were working on the Apollo (theater), we uncovered some granite and limestone from an era when the Apollo was a "Whites Only" theater. But the local community of Harlem embraced that. They said, 'that's beautiful, that's finished, that's elegant, permanent material. We want to see that again.' They did not want us to restore to the sort of 40s movie theater era, when

the Apollo was at the peak of its fame as an African-American venue.

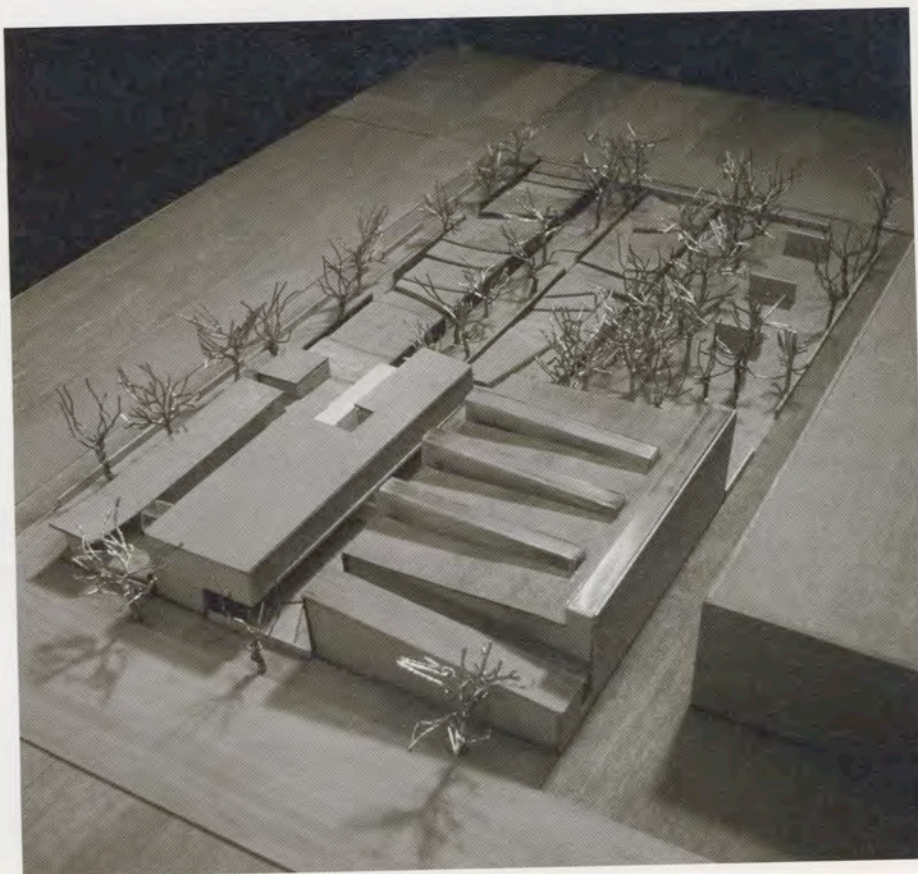
We've had quite a few discussions with a number of our clients — on this issue of Uptown versus Downtown.

COMPETITIONS: Since the Williamsburg Community Center competition, you have done a number of similar projects. Even though you didn't win the Williamsburg competition, did that serve as a springboard for these other jobs.

CAPLES: Certainly. Competitions have really been an incubator for ideas in our firm. We try to do about one competition every year. It helps take our ideas in a different direction and helps us look at things more analytically and without so many of the distractions where we typically have four or five simultaneous clients. There much of our design energy is used to solve design negotiation. Competitions are much purer: it's you and the idea — and generally not a lot of information. It's just the brief, put together pretty well sometimes, other times inexcusably uninformative. Usually there is enough information there for you to select some direction that you want to explore as a group and extend that idea in a way you haven't extended it before. It's a way to

Sara Caples and Everardo Jefferson in front of the **Heritage Center** (opposite page)

Williamsburg Community Center Competition Finalist (1997) Brooklyn, New York Aerial view of model (below)

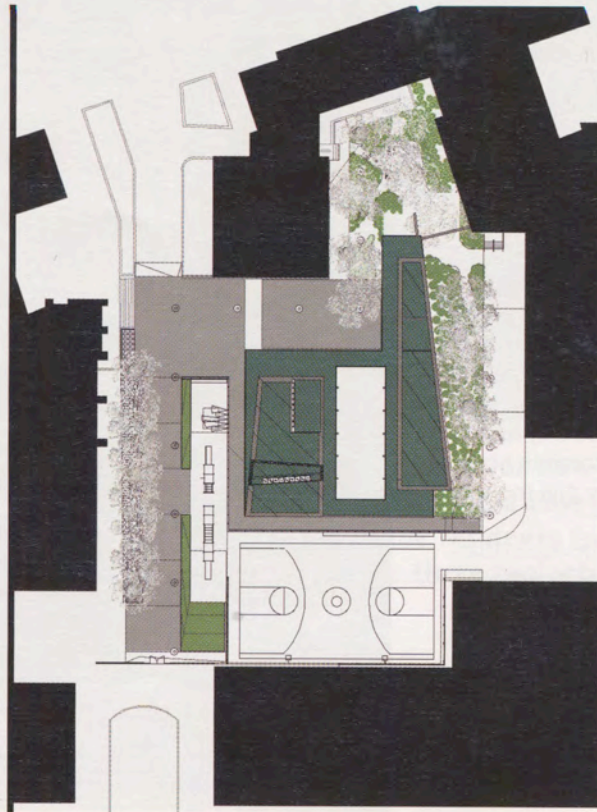




explore relationships between interior and exterior, all kinds of social relationships, layering — that concept was very big in Williamsburg. All those things we spent thinking about, drawing, and making models definitely enriched the project that followed.

COMPETITIONS: Isn't there a pretty standard formula for the design of community centers? Does the ethnic mix of the neighborhood play a major role? Are there more spatial guidelines one follows?

CAPLES: Let's start with the ethnic mix, because that is an interesting issue and one we are encountering more and more. In New York, typically the era of one a single ethnicity of being dominant in a neighborhood is over, whether it is in Harlem, East New York, or wherever. You usually have an interface between dissimilar groups like Puerto Ricans and Hassids. Try and figure that one out. You have to learn about frames outside your own, no matter how multi-cultural you are to begin with. So you have to find a kind of common sense ground and universal-aspirational ground. It helps to go back to phenomena — being alive, weather, seasons, days and nights. These are universals which



Marcus Garvey Houses Community Center
Brooklyn, New York

Aerial view of model (above)
Site plan (left)

Headquarters, Heritage Health & Housing
New York, NY
View to front entrance (opposite page)

