

Heightened Experience: Caples Jefferson



Since establishing their office in New York 15 years ago, Sara Caples and Everado Jefferson have made their mark with projects for nonprofit groups – social service agencies, housing authorities and charities. **Jayne Merkel** reveals how they have made it their intent 'to not just beat the odds', but also 'to provide an architectural experience of a very intense kind'.

Below

The Village of Greenport Waterfront Competition Entry, 1996

The design for the waterfront park provides various ways of becoming conscious of the sea. Tall windmills propelled by ocean breezes mark the entrance to the cove park, where a series of excavated trays encourages visitors to walk into the water and experience the rising and ebbing tides. A harbour walk curves around the bay, bridges over the cove and meanders past the marina, skirting the bow of the Regina Maria, a tall ship now permanently docked there. It

then passes a historic carousel near the village commercial centre and connects that bustling area with the ferry slip where cars leave for (and arrive from) the islands between the old-fashioned towns of the north fork and the glitzy Hamptons on the south. Every aspect of the design emphasises the role the ocean plays in the village's character, history and life today.

From their perch atop an old office building in New York's garment district, with bands of windows on three sides, the architects at Caples Jefferson can see the pinnacles of glittering new skyscrapers in Times Square, a row of high-rise apartment buildings marching along 42nd Street, sweatshops turned into stylish lofts (and not so stylish showrooms), a cluster of classic New York water towers and a swathe of the Hudson river. What they cannot see is people, which is uncannily ironic as, almost alone among the generation trained in the 1970s, they have made their mark with projects for social service agencies, the housing authority and nonprofit groups catering to the neediest of the needy.

'Projects nobody else wanted,' Sara Caples said. 'People knew we were interested in that kind of thing, so they sent them to us.' Caples and her husband, Everardo Jefferson, didn't just build the projects. They won awards and competitions with schemes for clients with minimal budgets and even smaller expectations.

Their intent, however, is not just to beat the odds. It's to provide an architectural experience of a very intense kind.

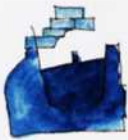
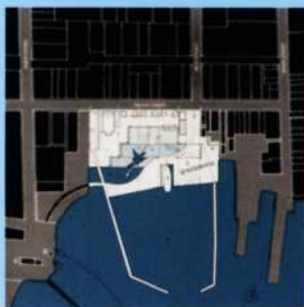
'In the 1970s, they failed to make the connection between architecture and sociology, between purpose and form,' Jefferson said. 'The programme has to be translated into form, and the form has to rise to the level of architecture.'

'I don't think a building has a real soul until it does,' Caples added. 'If you're not excited by the miracles of space and form and light, then you're really not experiencing architecture. But there isn't a word in English for that, like listeners for music, or viewers for art. What do we call people who have that intensified architectural experience?'

Recent projects intended to evoke that experience do so in different ways – with water, sound and light – but they all involve the element of time because, of course, architecture is experienced in time. It is also experienced directly, unlike music which most people today usually experience in recordings, or currents events which we see on television or read about in print. Even photographs come to us second- and third-hand. 'But in architecture,' as Caples notes, 'when you're in a space, you're there. It's direct, and we've tried to leverage that by intensifying your experience of the present, of space or the tactile.'

In a competition scheme of 1996 for the waterfront in the village of Greenport on the north fork of eastern Long Island, they cut away sections of the earth in a cove to create 'trays' at different levels, which are paved like steps so that you can walk on them and experience the tides. The lowest tray is at the level of the low tide; the highest is 6 inches below that of the high tide. On the trays you not only see the tides coming in and out but you experience them – move down into the water, stay above it, or cross over it on little bridges. As you do, of course, you become aware of time passing and your perception is slowed, confined and heightened.

The intensified experience at the firm's most recent project, the New Spirit Café in midtown Manhattan, was to have been one of meditative stillness created by water, light and sound. The project was commissioned by one of the city's most established churches to offer a spiritual experience to people who don't go to church. The idea was to create a casual secular gathering place

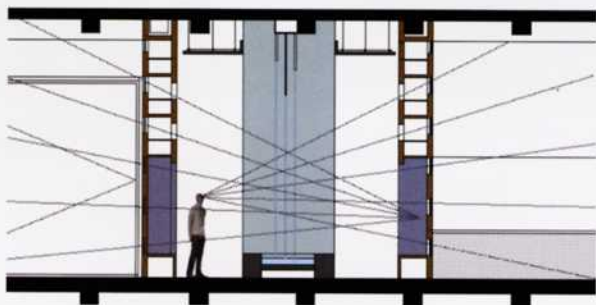
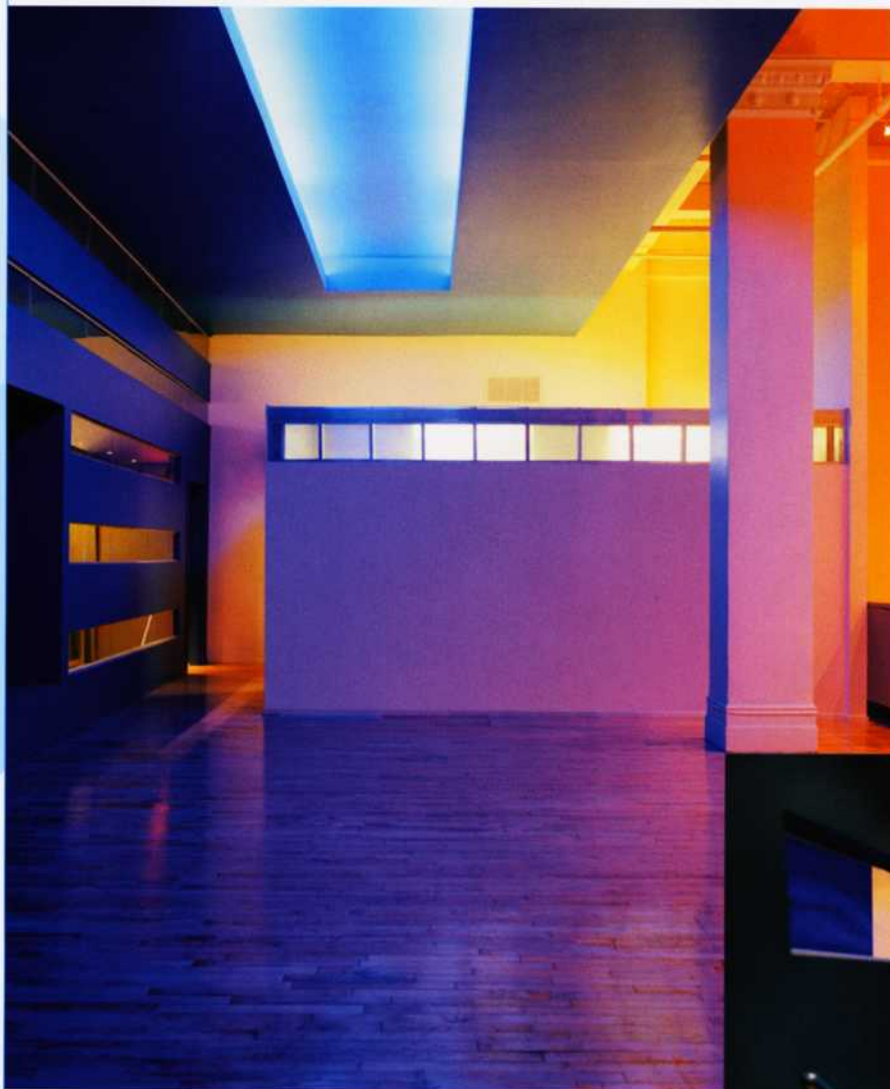


Below

The New Spirit Café, 2002

This New Age café, a casual secular meeting place in midtown Manhattan, was built by the Dutch Reformed Church to meet the spiritual needs of people 'who wish to pursue their journey away from a church'. The design was intended to allow the spiritual search to take place in an urban gathering place, familiar at first, yet different on deeper reading. Daylight enters in the front where people can have a simple meal, meet with friends

or relax before attending lectures and performances in the back, but there is also a mysterious place with cool blue, ethereal, artificial light. Although the idea of having a pool fed by slowly dripping water was eliminated from the final scheme, in the blue light the wall appears a pale rose in this place where people go to gather inner strength, or tell each other their secrets in an atmosphere of intense stillness.





This page and opposite
Heritage Health and Housing Headquarters, 2001
With an absolutely minimal budget, this 8,000-square-foot office building for a social agency which finds housing for recently released prisoners was created within two derelict structures just two blocks off Harlem's main drag. A two-storey former social club on West 126th Street and an abandoned one-storey garage on 127th were connected back-to-back, so natural light could only enter in the front and through a few slits along the sides, and almost half the available space was in dingy basements, so the architects inserted vertical shafts for natural

illumination. To give the place a sense of identity, they engaged the artist Nathan Slate Joseph to create a multicoloured collage on the facade, with sheets of painted galvanised steel that mediate between an elegant church on one end of the block and vacant lots and raw industrial buildings on the other. The entire project was constructed by unskilled neighbourhood workers for \$65 a square foot.



with natural light on both ends, and a pool in the middle of a space with blue walls and ceilings and filtered natural light from the rooms beyond. The 30-foot-long pool, 3 feet wide and 6 inches deep, was to contain a sheet of clear water floating in a turquoise plaster tank. Water was to drizzle down stainless-steel rods running from the ceiling to a point 6 inches above the water table, so that the soft sound of dripping water would create a gentle, natural rhythm, and there would be slight movement and reflections in the pool – a soothing, mesmerising experience. The blue wood ceiling was to be pierced by a recessed turquoise plaster slot emanating indirect light to reflect off the surface of the pool; blue artificial light in ceiling cove also contributed to the otherworldly atmosphere. Although the pool was eliminated from the final scheme, the central space in the café remains a contemplative place where people go to be alone with their thoughts.

Constantly changing natural light is the element brought into high relief at Heritage Health and Housing, a nonprofit social service agency in Harlem. Office space was created in two derelict back-to-back buildings, both of which had usable but dark underground spaces. The architects created a series of four vertical light-shafts running from the roof to the basement and covered them with translucent sheets of Polygal, a very lightweight cellular plastic material, about a tenth the price of glass. (Rem Koolhaas and Richard Gluckman

used the same material, which is strengthened by its cellular structure, in the Second Stage Theater off 42nd Street.) Caples and Jefferson chose the 'clear' version, but because three layers of the Polygal are used they appear translucent and rather mysterious. Yet the material lets in maximal amounts of light with some reflectivity.

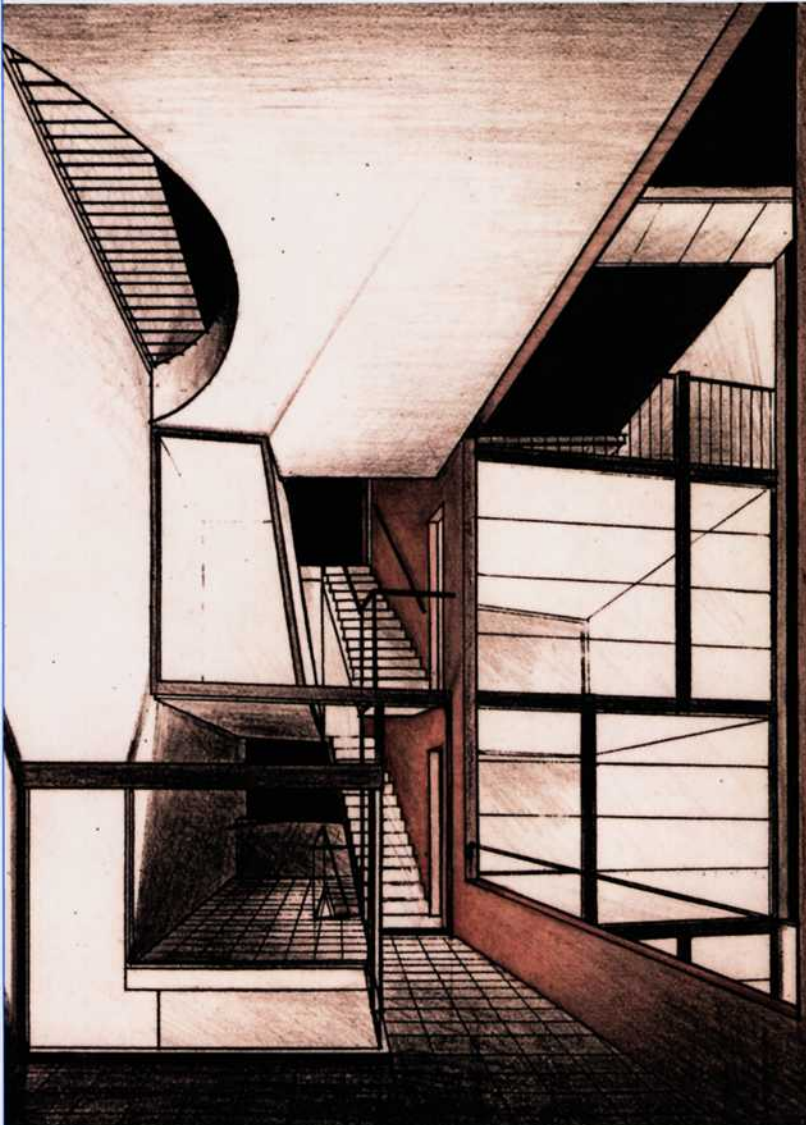
The light wells designed with lighting designer and daylight consultant Jeffrey Berg, of Berg/Howland Associates in Cambridge, Massachusetts, not only admit natural illumination – in the manner of spotlights, rather than floodlights – to the deepest recesses of the basement, they also allow the social workers and their clients to sense the time of day, the weather and the seasons, and subdivide the long deep space. Since the two buildings are not exactly aligned and the outer walls are not quite straight, the architects created a meandering spine through the space that adds interest and creates a path past the four vertical shafts of light that pierce the structure at regular intervals.

Jayne Merkel is a Contributing Editor to AD. A former editor of *Oculus* magazine in New York, she is currently working on a monograph on Eero Saarinen for Phaidon Press.

Below left and right

Three Generation House, Central Harlem, 1996

This modern three-family house on a street of old row houses accommodates a forward-looking couple in their 70s, the 'children' in their 50s and the 'grandchildren' in their 30s who have their own small children and a teenager. There are private quarters and outdoor spaces for each unit but shared dining for the whole family.



Below top

The [New York] Times Capsule, for an island in the East River, 1999

This monument, which was a finalist in the newspaper's millennial competition, was designed to last a thousand years while the granite slabs that surround it gradually peeled off recording the change of time. It would also have marked the rocky island, which will be submerged by 3000.

Below bottom

The Apollo Theater, 253 West 125th Street, Harlem, 2001

This design for the renovation of this famous theatre where black entertainers first stepped toward stardom in New York was intended to preserve and portray its history. The historic sign, redesigned in black on one side and white on the other, passed New York City Landmarks, but was too radical for the New York State Preservation Office.

Right top and middle

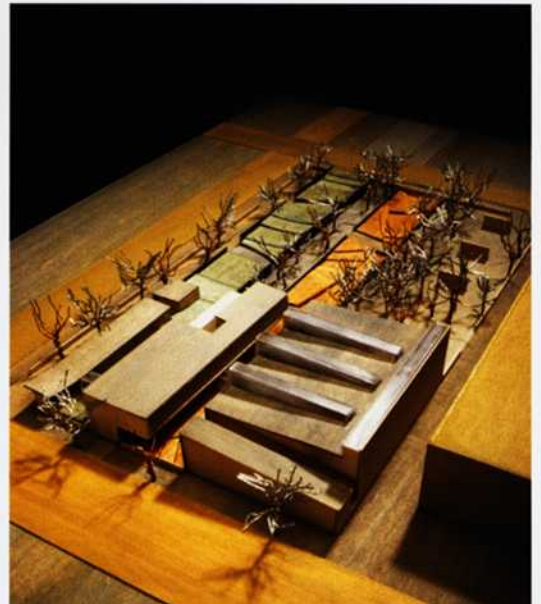
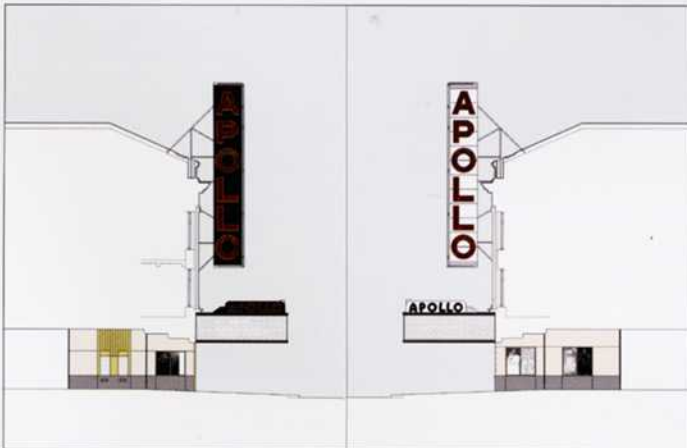
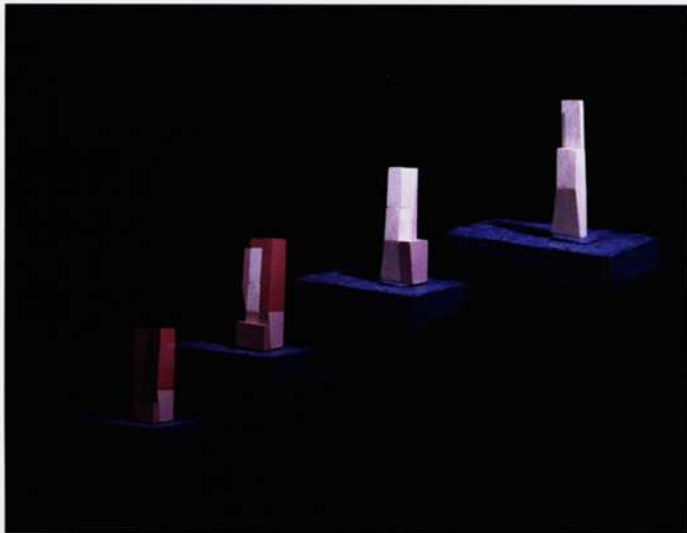
Marcus Garvey Houses Community Center, Brownsville, Brooklyn, 2003

The various activities available at this still-troubled housing project are physically separated but visible to each other, to provide a sense of energy and protection. Light construction is used for circulation, masonry for sport and craft areas.

Right bottom

Williamsburg Community Center, Williamsburg, Brooklyn, 1998

This competition scheme, for a park next to New York's only European Modern housing blocks, physically weaves community-centre functions into the park next door.



Below
 The Martin Luther King Memorial Competition Scheme, Washington, DC Mall, 2000
 The memorial is treated as a journey towards the Lincoln and Jefferson memorials, with a long internal pool reflecting toward the Washington obelisk. Visitors move into passages of translucent alabaster embossed with the words of the Man and images of the (civil rights) Movement.



Resumé

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| <p>1973 Everardo Agosto Jefferson received M.Arch. from Yale University School of Architecture</p> <p>1974 Sara Elizabeth Caples received M.Arch. from Yale University School of Architecture</p> <p>1973-76 Everardo Jefferson worked for Mitchell/Giurgola Associates, Architects</p> <p>1974-77 Sara Elizabeth Caples worked for Harry Weese & Associates</p> <p>1977-84 Everardo Jefferson worked for Yale University Construction Management Department</p> <p>1977-81 Sara Elizabeth Caples worked for Hellmuth, Obata & Kassabaum</p> <p>1981-89 Sara Elizabeth Caples worked for James Stewart Polshek and Partners</p> <p>1984-86 Everardo Jefferson worked for Edward Larrabee Barnes & Associates</p> <p>1984-92 Everardo Jefferson taught at the New Jersey Institute of Technology</p> <p>1985-86 Everardo Jefferson taught at the Columbia University</p> <p>1987 Everardo Jefferson forms Caples Jefferson Architects</p> <p>1989 Sara Elizabeth Caples joins Caples Jefferson Architects</p> <p>1991 Grace Church School renovation, New York City, with James Stewart Polshek and Associates</p> <p>1992 Jennie Knauff Children's Center, The Bronx, New York New York Macintosh Users Group, New York City</p> <p>1993 Brooklyn Blue Feather School, ADA renovations, Brooklyn, New York</p> <p>1995 Howard Haber Blue Feather School, The Bronx, New York Central Harlem Alcoholic Crisis Center Long Term Recovery Center, New York City [AIA New York Chapter Design Awards Citation]</p> | <p>1996 Greenport Tidal Park Competition, Greenport, New York House for Three Generations, New York City [AIA New York Chapter Design Awards Citation] The Valley Center, Church of Saint John-the-Divine, New York City</p> <p>1997 Williamsburg Community Center Competition, Brooklyn, New York City Lehman Houses Maintenance Building, New York City</p> <p>1998 Shurtleff School and auditorium, Chelsea, Massachusetts, with Finegold Alexander + Associates Taylor-Wythe Houses Community Center, Brooklyn, New York Cooper Park Houses Community Center, Brooklyn, New York DeSimone Consulting Engineers offices, New York City Lecturers in the Emerging Voices Series, The Architectural League of New York</p> <p>1999 Finalist, New York Times Capsule Competition, New York City Brevoort Houses Community Center, Brooklyn, New York</p> <p>2000 School for Autistic and Emotionally Disturbed Children, Brooklyn, New York Autism Center, Howard Haber Blue Feather School, The Bronx, New York Martin Luther King Memorial Competition, Washington, DC Swing Space Headquarters & Broadcasting Studios, UBO.net, New York City</p> <p>2001 Headquarters, Heritage Health & Housing, New York City</p> <p>2002 Child Care Center, Borough of Manhattan Community College, New York City New Spirit Café for Marble Collegiate Church, New York City Renovation of the Apollo Theatre, New York City Bronx Citizens Committee Alcoholic Crisis Center, The Bronx, New York</p> <p>2003 Marcus Garvey Houses Community Center, Brooklyn, New York</p> <p>2004 Fair Haven Middle School, New Haven, Connecticut, with Roth & Moore Architects</p> |
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