

Caples Jefferson Architects Blends Design With Community Needs

By Maitefa Angaza

Architects Everardo Jefferson and Sarah Caples have crafted a meaningful practice from a small Manhattan office on the water's edge. Wedded to one another and to the highest ideals of their profession, they make dreams come true in brick, glass and steel. Many of their projects, built to serve Black and Latino communities, have brought thoughtful and expert design to neighborhoods where joyless cookie-cutter structures have long been erected. It has taken tenacity, ingenuity and a sense of humor to survive as a business in New York City with their social contribution ethics intact.

Caples Jefferson Architects, launched from the couple's bedroom 12 years ago, has been operating for ten years from its 20 Waterside Plaza location. The company's very first project, redesigning a bedroom for a mother expecting a second child, was a good omen of things to come. Many of the buildings they've designed are sites where services are provided to children. The birth of their son Esteban, now 10, intensified this commitment. The Jennie Knauff Children's Center, a light- and color-filled preschool, was their first big project.

"The Bronx Lebanon Hospital owned an old Loews theater, which had most recently been used as a typing school," Jefferson recalled. "They contracted us to convert it into a preschool for children with HIV and AIDS. The idea was to provide a space near the hospital where staff sensitive to the needs of these children could work with them. It was Caples Jefferson Architects' challenging project and we were gratified when our design received some national attention."

After its success with the Jennie

Knauff Center, Caples and Jefferson Architects was contracted to design several other schools. Among these are: the Bronx-based Howard Haber Blue Feather School and Autism Center for developmentally disabled children, the Grace Church School renovation in Manhattan, which includes a homeless shelter, and the Child Care Center at the Borough of Manhattan Community College, which is under construction.

The BMCC design, featured in a New York Times article last summer, will double the existing space, converting a two-room center serving 40 children into a two-story facility with six classrooms accommodating

the Taylor-Wythe Houses, all in Brooklyn.

Construction is now underway at The Marcus Garvey Park Village Community Center in the East New York section of Brooklyn. For this project, the architects devised creative ways to provide residents with outdoor recreation space. They carved a 20- x 60-foot courtyard out of a basketball court and parking lot. Now residents can have social events in an outdoor area that is removed from street access. The building is also situated so that there are several smaller courtyards, one for young children, one for teens, one for adults and seniors. Each group can see the other

skylights, so we had to have bar grilles below, but we worked it in a visually playful way.

This provided the safety the parents and teachers felt was needed in a way that was uplifting rather than fearful."

The architects see beauty and inspiration as a design priority, particularly in buildings where the daily work can take a toll on the spirit. The firm designed the Central Harlem Alcoholic Crisis Long Term Recovery Center (not as yet built), the Bronx Citizens Committee Alcoholic Crisis Center (on the boards) and other similar sites. Work is just beginning on the headquarters they designed for Heritage Health & Housing, a

residential and treatment program for sexually abusive ex-offenders.

"People who work in social programs deserve nice spaces because they're doing a really hard job," Jefferson said. His partner agreed. "There are certain fundamentals we always think of," Caples said.

"First we feel that these should all be places of hopefulness. For us that translates into spaces with a certain quality of light—usually daylight. We also think a lot about views, so there is some kind of relationship to the outside, and about reconnecting people to the passages of the

days and the seasons. That's meaningful to a lot of people and you can easily lose the thread of that in the city."

The Heritage House plans to divide a two-story structure into segments defined by skylights along the main corridor. As one walks through, each segment is lit by a slightly different quality of daylight travelling straight down from the roof to the basement. Because the building is in an area predominated by businesses such as bakeries and garages, the architects brought in artist Nathan Joseph to create a facade that was at once urban



Sara Caples and Everardo Jefferson with son Esteban. They started Caples Jefferson Architects from their home 12 years ago.

113 children. The project combines function with service. Parents taking classes will be able to arrange childcare at fees ranging from \$1 to \$35 weekly, depending on their income. The observation windows incorporated in the design will allow students in the early childhood program to learn from watching children at school.

In addition to the educational facilities, the firm has designed many community centers for public housing developments across the city, including those at the Breevort Houses, the Cooper Park Houses and

and feel secure while socializing. The challenge of providing both security and comfort is one that Caples Jefferson has met successfully in the past.

"We'll address a need cited by a client very respectfully," Caples said. "But we always try to build a space where people can work and enjoy themselves. So if there is an issue in a neighborhood about being secure, we confront that issue in a way that is positive. Instead of wire mesh, we might use bulletproof glass, for example. We designed a preschool on the Grand Concourse and put in these

and rustic, blending perfectly with the feel of the neighborhood. Design of this type results from a good working relationship with open-minded clients, a situation they happily find themselves in when working with small non-profit concerns.

Jefferson and Caples now work with a small staff of young architects whom they credit with giving back almost as much in terms of energy and ideas as they gain from the firm's experience. The couple travels once each year, taking trips organized around whatever foreign architecture they'd like to see that year. They're fascinated by the way architects in many nations use design to celebrate nature and bring the outdoors inside. Their travels have exposed them to several great architects never mentioned throughout what Caples characterized as their "Eurocentric" education. They remain on a mission to open vistas for themselves and for clients.

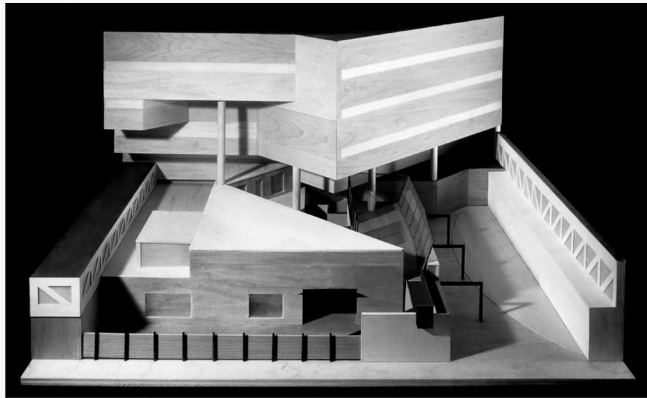
"When we started the firm we had three ideas," Jefferson said. "First, 50 percent of our work would be community involved. (And we thought that would be easy!) The second thing was to do good

research—not just the codes and such—but the people and uses behind the project. For example, if we were doing something for autistic kids, we'd research autism; find out what it's all about. The third issue was to represent the history of our discipline by

something that was just going to happen out of the blue on a particular project.

It would always be the glue holding everything together."

Caples Jefferson Architects has won awards, including one from the



Model of the Manhattan Community College Day Care Center

making design powerful and strong. We thought that if we had a group of people who were interested in social issues, we'd also make a design impact. Architecture was not

New York Chapter of the Institute of Architects. Last year the firm was recognized by the Architectural League, which each year honors eight architects nationwide as "emerging

voices." Still, Caples and her spouse have just begun to feel comfortable saying the company has a definite future. While they love the community work they've been doing, the firm could use a few larger projects to help pay the bills. Because they are a small company, they are categorized as a "boutique firm" and are legally disqualified from bidding on large government projects. So they bid on a variety of other projects and keep an eye on the bottom line while savoring the fruits of their labor and its many intangible rewards.

"We finished a community center in Bedford-Stuyvesant recently and I was there mopping the floor to get the place ready for the photographer," Jefferson said. "It wasn't finished to my satisfaction and I was noticing little things I didn't like. Then a woman knocked on the door and asked, 'When's it gonna be ready?' And I said, 'Next week.' And she said, 'It's really pretty!' Then I realized that my concerns are relatively minor. The people that the center was built for—they just want to get in! There's this beautiful light coming in, the kids can go there and feel safe, and I guess that's what it's all about." ♦