



RANALLI-DESIGNED NYCHA ADDITION RAISES BAR IN BED-STUY

A Bright Spot in Brooklyn

These are hard times for the New York City Housing Authority, and its future looks even bleaker. In order to close a looming \$195 million deficit in its operating budget, the authority is proposing raising rents on its 406,000 tenants (in 2,600 buildings) and closing dozens of community centers all over the city. But with an authority as large and complex as NYCHA, nothing is ever simple. At the same time as these cuts are being proposed, the authority has just opened an extraordinary new community center in Bedford-Stuyvesant.

The Saratoga Street Community Center is a building of a type not seen in New York since the heyday of postmodernism in the 1980s. It was designed by George Ranalli, Architect and is the firm's first ground-up building in New York, although Ranalli has completed many interior renovations and has also been an important teacher—and is now dean—at the City College of New York. In a new monograph, Michael Sorkin points to Ranalli's presence on the design scene: "We know Ranalli's work so well, in part [as] a byproduct of its easy dissemination over the ether. And because his work is exceptionally widely published and exceptionally well regarded in a representational culture that simply elides the conceptual and the literal and grow(s) gracefully from the long rich line of his sensibility—and is simply *there*."

The project comprises the complete renovation of a community center within an 18-story housing tower, plus a 3,500-square-foot addition to hold a new meeting and recreational room (a rental party space on weekends), kitchen, bathrooms, and a new director's office. It was completed on a shoestring for about \$300 per square foot—fairly typical for a NYCHA project—but also manages to achieve a level of thoughtfulness in its detailing and execution that would be impressive for any project, let alone one that is an addition to a public housing complex. What is so unusual, at least within today's design environment, is its unabashed use of historical references, to Frank Lloyd Wright, Carlo Scarpa, and Raimund Abraham. It's no pastiche, though. The design shows a sensitivity to composition that makes it feel fresh and autonomous

as a work of architecture.

The building not only provides a dignified new community center for an undistinguished NYCHA tower, but anchors its midblock site, creates two usable outdoor spaces (where once there were none), and brings a streetwall to an amorphous urban landscape. The process of constructing such a building can be excruciatingly demanding when value engineers and bureaucrats get their hands on it, and so it's a feat that this beautifully crafted center actually got built. The materials suggest a far richer patronage, and do the housing authority proud. Credit also goes to Ranalli, who must have fought hard to get (and keep) such a rich palette: Warm limestone, buff-colored ironspot brick, cast stone, and harvested mahogany doors all add up to a compelling composition bringing dignity to its adjacent public housing project and its surrounding urban landscape. "It is an excellent demonstration of how much can be achieved on a very limited budget," said David Burney, who was design director of NYCHA when Ranalli was commissioned in 2002. And we hope it's not a never-to-be-repeated accident. **WILLIAM MENKING**



The community center's courtyard entrance.