

## DESIGN

**Born in Brooklyn: the Ashland Center****Mixed-use project strives to give neighborhood tools and resources to maintain borough's resurgence***by Zach Mortice  
Associate Editor***How do you . . .** design a mixed-use project that respects its neighborhood's scale?

**Summary:** The Ashland Center, designed by Studio MDA and Behnisch Architects, looks to neighborhood forms and massing to create a residential tower that inspires a sense of community and ownership. Its mixed-use parti also contains retail space and a dance theater. The project's sustainability goals will be formulated around construction- and performance-based metrics.



The leading edge of the migration of young professionals, artists, and musicians fueling the borough of Brooklyn's cultural revival has already passed the Fort Greene neighborhood where the mixed-use Ashland Center will rise. The L-train exodus that pushed the emerging creative-class set out of Manhattan over a decade ago is gentrifying Fort Greene, Williamsburg, Bushwick, and beyond. In its wake are rapidly changing neighborhoods with overheated real estate prices inhospitable to the young idea-rich and capital-poor. The Ashland Center's goal is to step back closer to where this wave first crashed on the shores of Brooklyn and establish affordable residential space for new and long-time residents and provide similarly subsidized art and performance spaces. The Ashland Center is one part of a planned cultural district that will center on one of Brooklyn's storied cultural institutions, the Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM).

"What this really enables is the potential for long-term affordable space that arts organizations that are typically threatened by the rising cost of real estate can rely on to create a stable home and really be part of this community," says Katie Dixon, capital projects coordinator for the BAM Cultural District.

**Learning from the last generation's****neighborhoods in the sky**

There are three components to the Ashland Center's mixed-use program. A rental residential tower, dance studio and theater, and retail space. Half of the rental units will be subsidized affordable housing. The project will be within walking distance of another of Brooklyn's mega-projects: AIA Gold Medal winner Frank Gehry's (now stalled) Atlantic Yards. The Ashland Center is a completely integrated collaboration between New York's Studio MDA and Stuttgart, Germany-based Behnisch Architecture, whose architects have been working out of Studio MDA's offices on the project. The team is still programming some features of the building, and don't yet know the final materials that will be used or the final allocation of space among the project's three elements.

The two firms looked to the neighborhood context of smaller-scaled buildings to determine their tower's form.

"The fabric of Fort Greene is usually smaller-scaled houses with gardens," says Markus Dochantschi, a principal at Studio MDA. "In a sense, we took this horizontal fabric and turned it vertical."

The tower is composed of five rectangular volumes, attached to a central core and spine, that are offset from each other and topped with landscaped gardens. Its massing is strikingly similar to the Harlem Park tower building by Swanke Hayden Connell Architects at 125th St. and Park Ave. Both use appropriately scaled masses indigenous to the neighborhood to build larger projects in a contextually respectful way.



The goal for the tower, Dochantschi says, is to create a "different typology for high-rise affordable housing," and the team's design is an internalization of the lessons learned about urban alienation and disharmony from mid-20th century, monolithic, mega-block public housing projects like Pruitt Igoe in St. Louis and Cabrini Green and the Robert Taylor Homes in Chicago. The Ashland Center aims to create the sense of community that these places failed to by limiting the number of units per floor and keeping each of the five volumes human-scaled and approachable.

A garden is never more than four stories away from any apartment, and public amenities are organized around these terraces to further encourage neighborly interaction and community identification with the building and, more specifically, the smaller volume each resident lives in. "We think it's very important to create a sense of ownership, and a sense of identity with the buildings you live in," says Dochantschi.

**Mixed media**

Below the tower is the project's cultural component, a dance theater and studio that Dixon says will be inhabited by a permanent tenant. Its first floor is a transparent lobby that contains some of the project's retail space and the entrance to the theater. Above this is the boxy, cantilevered theater. It will contain a primary performance space that seats 199 people, as well as four choreographic studios, one of which can also be used for performances.

Arup is providing theater consulting and acoustic design services to the project, and the Norwegian firm Snohetta is the interior designer for the theater and dance studio. Though the theater will center on dance performance, Arup's David Taylor says that its technical capabilities will help break down the fading divisions between modern art media, allowing the incorporation of video and art installations, interactivity, explorations of the connection between body movement and sound, and more. "We're at a point with generational change where we have to be trying to identify how convergence of different media is happening," he says.

**Construction and performance**

Sustainability is an important aspect of the project, and Dochantschi says it will involve both active and passive sustainability features. The team of architects isn't relying on LEED® for guidance, though Snohetta estimates the building will attain LEED Silver certification. Studio MDA and Behnisch Architects' metrics are purely construction- and performance-based. "For us, what really counts is how much energy is needed to build the building and how much energy is needed to operate the building," says Dochantschi. "If that happens to be LEED Platinum, or Silver, or Gold—great."