To the Design Community

Whether you're a designer, engineer, or lawyer, lending your skills to New York City is a civic service. As some neighborhoods receive consistent design upgrades in their public spaces, neighborhoods where low- and moderate-income people of color live receive very few or even none at all. We see your enthusiasm, within professional organizations and design education institutions, to change this pattern and root your practices in communities where resources are most needed.

Your unique skills demonstrating possibilities, thinking holistically, and making visions tangible — when brought with compassion and empathy — can be powerful tools for change. In order to support local visions for public space, we need the design community to partner with local leaders in new ways. So how do we do it? We invite you to consider our learnings from working with seven project teams:

1. Approach your practice in a new way

This isn't your typical client relationship. In realizing community visions for public space, it is essential to recognize from the beginning that everyone is bringing something to the table.

You may bring technical expertise, creative tools, facilitation chops, and even your personal experience. You may be working with people who have been let down by design processes in the past, or alienated by technical language. Consider how you can stay grounded in accessible language and human experience, and bring some of yourself to the table too. A neighborhood organization may be bringing rooted local relationships, government relations chops, and technical skills of their own. We've found that building a strong partnership starts from a place of

listening, empathy, and building trust — often in person (not just on a video call or over email!). Be prepared to show up and to stick with it.

2. Build an agreement that is more than a contract

Getting on the same page at the beginning of a project is essential in working well together. Local Center teams were most successful when they had clear conversations about their partnership and working relationships, not just project scope. Consider talking through and putting on paper:

- Shared Values: What values, like building community ownership or staying grounded in local needs, are guiding your work together? These can be your touchstones as you progress together.

- Community Agreements: How do you want to work together? Learn about and agree on shared frameworks, such as 'step up, step back' and 'recognize intent and impact,' that can address power dynamics and allow for all team members to contribute.

- Roles and Expectations: Who is responsible for what pieces of the work? Detail out your expectations, so that each team member feels em-

powered to lead and support where it best aligns with their skills and knowledge. Unlike many client relationships, you may need to think flexibly about your role as a designer to take on new roles such as a facilitator, translator, and thought partner.

- Communication Channels: How will you communicate? Neighborhood partners or the people they work with may be operating on channels beyond email, like WhatsApp, Signal, or others. Be prepared to adapt your style to meet that of the groups you're working with.

- Project Scope: What are you each responsible for delivering? Though you may come into a project with a scope in mind, have a conversation about how you would adjust if things shift, pathways for bringing in additional support should you need it, and how you'd solve problems together.

3. Build complementary teams

As you build a team, consider how you can draw on your own strengths and partner with others to fill gaps. Each project will have distinct needs. Core capacities we have seen as critical along the way include:

- Community Engagement: Inclusive tools and approaches were critical in complementing partners outreach efforts.

- Design: Renderings and planning can visualize a space or installation, and design thinking helped expand possibilities for the projects.

- Engineering: Especially when constructing installations, it's critical to have an engineering eye (and possibly even a sign-off!) to give permitting agencies confidence about your plans.

- Legal: Dedicated support to help navigate agency permitting pathways and other land use questions was essential. Many law firms have

robust pro-bono practices to partner with and learn from.

- Fabrication, Art, and Other Creative Collaborators: Partnering with local fabricators and artists can build local buy-in and incorporate unique local culture into your project.

4. There is value beyond fees in contributing to locally-driven projects.

Across our projects, we found that lead design teams, ranging from 2 to 10 people in size, spent an average of 880 hours over the course of 12 to 18 months, while lawyers and engineers spent an average of 250 hours. Firms created low- and pro-bono programs that allowed them to allocate staff time in creative ways.

Beyond fees, these projects have provided firms with great visibility around corporate social responsibility, opportunities to present their work at local and national conferences, and emerging staff to progress in their leadership. Demonstrating your leadership in social practice can raise the profile of your firm as a whole.

Finally, Local Center teams are continuing to work with their partners with support from new grants or city contracts. Your involvement in projects at an early stage can build critical momentum to welcome in more resources, and potentially continued partnership that can build for years to come.

5. Join us in advocating for community-led design solutions and structural change

The Local Center is committed to expanding opportunities for emerging and established designers, planners, architects, and engineers to contribute their skills to neighborhood projects through the Local Center, and through our proposal for the Fund for the Public Realm. We invite you to join us in advocacy efforts to city government and funders to enable community-driven projects across New York City.