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# AIA Feature



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A Studio Gang-led redesign of the Arkansas Art Center, which has been a cultural staple in the Little Rock community since the 1930s, will make the structure newly relevant.

# Making Space for Innovation

**Two rehabilitation projects by women-led firms are pushing the boundaries of what's possible for legacy spaces.**

By Amanda Koellner

The option of spending a Saturday morning in a glass-blowing class at the local art center or a 97-degree afternoon in a cool public pool make living in a particular community worthwhile. But with years of bustling activity—or, say, an inherently flawed original design or a structure plagued by a disjointed collection of additions—comes the inevitable need for an architectural revamp.

Two new design projects, each with women-led firms at the helm, prove that when it's time for an update, legacy institutions can better serve their communities when architects bring innovative designs to the table and use the surrounding landscape as a prime source of inspiration.

In Manhattan, Central Park's Lasker Rink and Pool, which has provided the Harlem community with free swimming, low-cost skating, and public programming since 1966, has long been in desperate need of some love. In 2015 the city approached the Central Park Conservancy—the private nonprofit founded in 1980 to revitalize the park—with a proposal to partner on a major project to address the failing facility.

Persistent flooding has been a problem since the facility opened, so much so that if it leaked at the rate it's capable of, 50 gallons per hour, without being patched, it would be empty in less than 24 hours. Plus, the refrigerant used to make ice in the winter, a type of Freon called R22, was recently banned, so when Lasker's supply runs out, the entire

mechanical system will be finished.

Given that the current structure is failing and beyond repair, an opportunity arose to deliver a brand new state-of-the-art facility that will support year-round programming for a variety of park users. The new design will keep the pool's Olympic size and add a regulation-size hockey rink.

"Floating in the middle of the existing pool is quite magical," says Susan T. Rodriguez, FAIA, whose eponymous architecture firm is handling the redesign in collaboration with the Central Park Conservancy and New York-based Mitchell Giurgola Architects. "But the whole experience of getting in and everything else is not."

Lasker currently blocks the scenic, recently renovated Ravine in the park's North Woods—so much so that Harlem residents and park-goers largely don't know it exists—and breaks up a watercourse that would otherwise flow freely down from the northeastern corner's Harlem Meer, a body of water in Central Park's northeastern corner.

"I had to intuitively understand, 'Where

can we find space to integrate this into the topography?' because that was the way to return this to the natural setting," Rodriguez says of the project, which is set to break ground in 2021 and be completed by the summer of 2024. "There's a huge responsibility in this transformation to get it right."

To start, she leaned on the park's chief landscape architect, Chris Nolan, and Central Park Conservancy vice president for planning, design and construction Lane Addonizio for a historical deep dive. "This project really is the culmination of the conservancy's work of restoring the park since 1980 for its main purpose: for it to be a reprieve from the city for all New Yorkers," Addonizio says, citing original designers Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux, who intended for the park to both "provide the best practicable means of healthful recreation" and offer "an aspect of spaciousness and tranquility to afford the most agreeable contrast to the confinement, bustle, and monotonous street-division of the city."

Next, extensive community research involved conversations with birders, skaters



# AIA Feature

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and swimmers (of course), the “hockey player who skates in the winter and brings his 18-month-old to the park for picnics in the summer,” and everyone in between to understand what they would want out of a new facility. With history top of mind and annual visitors totaling 200,000 for the pool and rink, 2.5 million for the Harlem Meer, and 2 million for the North Woods, the team knew the redesign would need to benefit not just those that use the pool and rink, but the public in general.

The result? Rodriguez has pivoted the building and pool to the east and carved space for the whole facility into the existing steep topography. This opens up the watercourse and provides room for a swimming pool of a different shape—a sleek oval favorable over the toilet-bowl-esque design currently in place—that’s almost the same size as the existing one. This opens the Harlem community up to both the facility and the currently invisible scenic view of the northwestern edge of the park. “The original pool is just a mega-building that could be anywhere,” Rodriguez says. “The new design isn’t just about a building, it’s about space, and making space. Everything will be much more fluid and accessible.”

The facility will feature 32 5-foot-by-14-foot glass doors that pivot and open to create a ventilated porch in the summer or close for a cozy warming hut in the winter (plus, the new facility will be open year-round, while currently it’s closed for about half of the year). Fieldstone retaining walls undulate and transition from outside to inside, so even when visitors are indoors, they’ll feel embraced by natural materials. The historic Huddlestone Arch (circa 1866) will now be visible, and the newly opened watercourse will extend the overall experience to the north. A new pergola and boardwalk near the pool provide additional opportunities for skating in the winter and will reintroduce a freshwater marsh to the park while also helping with the drainage issue. (“The birders are very excited,” the team says of the forthcoming flora and fauna.)

Additional sustainable components include bird-safe glass on the building, maximized solar conditions, natural ventilation, stormwater management, systems for the pool and rink that are as energy efficient as possible, and a highly technical green roof atop the facility. The hope is that the roof will blend into the existing topography so seamlessly, visitors will have a hard time knowing when the existing landscape starts and the roof ends—or that they’re standing on top of a building at all.

“I’ve lived in New York for a long time. My grandfather used to bring me to the park, and I remember coming here and skating,” Rodriguez says. “This is the project of a lifetime for me. I love working in the public realm, and to see that it can effect such an important change and improve the quality of life for everybody. ... I think [the park is] going to be of such greater value to the city and the community.”

## Innovation Further South

New York City and Little Rock, Ark., don’t have too much in common, but a project more than 1,200 miles away from Central Park that broke ground last October carries striking similarities to Lasker Pool and Rink.

The Arkansas Art Center has been a cultural staple in the local community since the 1930s. “We always say that the AAC has been a victim of its own success,” says Juliane Wolf, AIA, design principal and partner at Studio Gang (led by Jeanne Gang, FAIA), who is leading the center’s redesign. “It has something a lot of cultural institutions are struggling to gain, which is a really robust programming that engages a multitude of communities, but the existing facility doesn’t have a unified identity—or, it certainly doesn’t have an identity that suggests the exciting things happening on the inside.”

That lack of identity is the result of eight additions piled on over the decades—all with distinct architectural styles—which do the center a disservice by presenting a jumbled appearance to unknowing passersby. It also leads to an experience inside that leaves something to be desired.

The AAC is home to a museum, museum school, and children’s theater, but if a parent came to a performance in the children’s theater, they’d easily miss the fact that the center houses close to 14,000 works of art and offers classes for people of all ages.

Reconnecting the currently incoherent sections of the center is the crown jewel of the project: a thin folded-plate concrete structure, dubbed the “blossom.” It runs atop the center from the north to the south and reaches into MacArthur Park, offering a new axis of connectivity.

“The blossom provides a more intuitive visit, where people know where they’re going; or if they come in for the first time, the space will be very welcoming,” says Victoria Ramirez, executive director of the Arkansas Art Center.

Beyond affording a more holistic design,

Studio Gang is adding a glass-enclosed space dubbed the “cultural living room” where people can read and enjoy a cup of coffee, socialize, or host events—further solidifying the AAC’s position as a hub for the community. Beneath it will be the north-facing entrance: the original 1937 building, which Wolf says is both a nod to the center’s history and “the heart and soul of the structure.”

More technical problems will also be solved with the revamp: art-handling will move to the northwest corner, so pieces won’t have to travel across the entire AAC to the museum. Studio Gang also notes that the center has one of the best works-on-paper collections in the country, but many pieces can’t be displayed due to spacing, lighting, or HVAC conditions—all of which will be remedied by the new redesign.

As outdated systems are updated, sustainability continues to come to the forefront of the project. Native planting, stormwater management via pleats that will feed new gardens and perennial meadows, daylighting, and reusing elements of the existing building wherever possible all contribute to the new LEED Silver rating.

As Studio Gang designed an outdoor dining pavilion to replace the existing parking lot, SCAPE Landscape Architecture added more than 2,200 linear feet of new paths and trails and 250 new trees to the surrounding parkland, Studio Gang and SCAPE studied Little Rock’s surrounding agricultural landscapes in order to create a “museum in a forest” where the arts center and the park can blend into one.

All told, Wolf hopes the design will not only service the large existing AAC fan base, but usher in a new wave of visitors. “It’s very much beloved with the groups that know of it and are a part of it, but there’s a huge population in Little Rock and beyond that’s not aware of what’s happening inside, or might not feel very welcome because of the structure,” she says. “The hope is that when there’s a school group that’s coming to see a play in the theater, that they’ll see into the art school and maybe want to take a class; or see the sculptures, and decide to walk through the galleries for a cross-fertilization between the programs that should have a very big impact on the visitors.”

Ramirez echoes the sentiment. “The design is so smart in that our biggest disadvantage in the old building will become the biggest advantage of the new building,” she says. “In so many ways, this building is the future of where art museums are going—needing to be spaces for people as much as art.” **AIA**