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ASLA Olmsted Medal Nomination  
c/o Carolyn Mitchell  
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Since 1995, the Design Trust for Public Space has deployed a unique project model to bring together government agencies, community groups and private-sector experts to transform and evolve the city's landscape. Today, the non-profit organization is a nationally-recognized incubator that transforms and evolves the city's landscape with city agencies and community collaborators. Their work can be seen, felt and experienced throughout all five boroughs of New York City—from parks and plazas to streets and public buildings.

The organization was founded by Andrea Woodner—a sculptor trained as an architect and a native New Yorker—who had a vision for an organization that could transform the life of the city by connecting city agencies with the burgeoning design community. She named it “Design Trust for Public Space” to reflect the mission of bringing design expertise and design thinking to the public realm.

Over the past 20 years, their work has shaped New York in many ways. Their approach is unique in its method, scope and timeline. The organization fosters unconventional partnerships to tackle complex issues of land use, policy and funding. Projects can span multiple phases, regions or areas of expertise, with flexibility and openness to pursuing further work when needed. Long-term projects and publications, often difficult to fund or support within smaller non-profits or city agencies, find a home to grow and flourish within the incubator of the Design Trust.

With every project, the Design Trust acts as a catalyst –delivering innovative, yet feasible, solutions for project partners to implement. Project partners are open to submit their ideas and needs during open RFP processes. Often in tandem with their larger projects are photography fellowships, exhibits, lectures, outdoor events and community gatherings.

Over the years, the Design Trust has honed a flexible process to foster collaboration and quality results. Hallmarks of their programs include working across sectors and institutional barriers and engaging all stakeholders in the project. Distinct and diverse Advisory Committees are formed for each project, which help to advise multi-disciplinary project teams. Projects are often broken down into multiple phases as teams field test findings and recommendations. Final deliverables are often tailored and diversified to the goals of the project as it evolved.

Customized to each project's needs, a range of steps can include community workshops, online tools and platforms, public exhibitions, temporary installations, public panels, discussions and tours, feasibility studies, visual storytelling, and international ideas competitions. More permanent results of this process range from publications of research and findings, public policy recommendations, and design guidelines.



The Design Trust has focused their work to transform and evolve the city's landscape through four key areas: design excellence, environmental sustainability, mobility and neighborhood revitalization:

**Design Excellence** focuses on the belief that quality design of public spaces stems from in-depth collaboration between city government and the private sector. Design guidelines spanning buildings, infrastructure and landscapes distill the knowledge and experience of city staff and in-house designers, and integrate this with creative ideas from industry experts to develop thoughtful and effective solutions to existing and emerging challenges. When adopted and implemented, these guidelines bring about widespread improvements to the built environment that can be seen and felt by all New Yorkers.

**Environmental Sustainability** encompasses city sidewalks and streets to public parks and buildings, with their sustainability projects having changed the way the city is designed, built and managed. Working through public symposia, peer review and inter-agency education, they have influenced city policy – notably Local Law 86 and PlaNYC – embedding sustainable practices conserving energy, improving air quality and protecting our waterways into the systems that run New York City.

**Mobility** is crucial in New York City's streets and sidewalks, subways, buses, taxis, and ferries, New York's most highly trafficked public spaces, where people from diverse backgrounds intersect. But the Design Trust acknowledges that mobility is not just about forms of transportation – they emphasize how people move through the city and how public spaces act as connective tissue throughout our vast metropolis. Recognition that these spaces offer opportunities for new types of connectivity, new forms of shared experience, and technical innovation, are evidenced in their eight-year engagement with the city's taxi system, their study of the High Line, and their analysis of the pedestrian environment in Times Square.

**Neighborhood Revitalization;** healthy, urban neighborhoods, depend on many things: sufficient mixed-income housing availability, a strong business base, appropriate density, and great parks and public open spaces. The Design Trust believes that thoughtful design—informed by the needs and desires of community users—makes the difference between those places that are vital, well-used and well-managed, and those that are not. Their unique ability to engage city agencies, community groups, and private sector experts helps ensure our neighborhoods are dynamic, livable, and sustainable for the residents that call New York City home.

Through all of this fantastic work, the Design Trust has influenced and shaped the design and policies of New York City. In doing so, their work inspires and informs cities around the world, which look to New York as a testing ground for a range of creative solutions to complex challenges within urban environments. But perhaps just as influential as the outcomes of their work is the process that they foster with multiple partners, led by over 80 landscape architects or allied professionals. These fellows are given the opportunity to step outside of their typical practice, and work with a dedicated team with financial support. This experience has been impactful on many careers, including my own. The projects led by the Design Trust live not only in their built form or policy changes, but also in the works of the partners transformed by the process.



## **Select Projects**

### *Reclaiming the High Line 1999–2002*

In collaboration with Friends of the High Line, the Design Trust conducted a comprehensive feasibility study and outlined recommendations for the reuse of the elevated railway as public open space. This project catalyzed efforts to save and reprogram the High Line by inspiring Mayor Bloomberg to rescind the demolition order on the rail line, served as the basis for an ideas competition that received 720 proposals and informed a rezoning plan that established the High Line Transfer Corridor, facilitating its use as a public open space.

Friends of the High Line formed in 1999 with the goal of preserving the structure, and approached the Design Trust that same year proposing a design competition. The Design Trust felt a competition was premature given that there was still a demolition order on the railway, so instead they proposed a comprehensive feasibility study. To create the study, two fellows, Casey Jones and Keller Easterling, spent 12 months meeting with community groups, development experts and design professionals to evaluate the feasibility of reuse alternatives. They researched and analyzed the High Line's historical significance, physical conditions, local zoning, current land use and community needs, and evaluated all the possibilities for the High Line – demolition, reuse for transit, reuse for commerce and reuse for open space.

The resulting study, *Reclaiming the High Line*, determined that reuse outweighed demolition, the design should focus on pedestrians, commercial potential existed alongside the High Line, and a walkway atop of the High Line would cause values of adjacent properties to rise due to the proximity to this open public space. With the study, Friends of the High Line was able to convince the Bloomberg administration that the elevated railway should be preserved, enabling them to move forward with their goal of turning the railway into an elevated park.

The first section of the High Line Park opened in 2009 and incorporated many of the recommendations documented in *Reclaiming the High Line*.

- Pedestrian use is the best reuse for the High Line
- Visitors should enjoy a variety of environments
- Plantings should recreate original meadows
- Art should be part of the design and programming
- The space should be recreational and contemplative
- The space should include some commercial uses
- The space should not become a mall
- Zoning incentives should be used to attract private financing for this public amenity

The park has since become one of the most active public spaces in New York City– a “must see” for over two million residents and visitors each year – and has inspired similar initiatives in other cities to repurpose abandoned and derelict infrastructure.

### *Reinventing Grand Army Plaza 2008–2010*

GAPCo, an alliance of community groups and cultural institutions, responded to Design Trust's 2007 RFP with a proposal to create a new schematic plan for Grand Army Plaza to make it safer, friendlier to pedestrians, and more efficient as a major traffic thoroughfare.



To lay the groundwork for a new master plan, the Design Trust recommended the project's first phase be an ideas competition to attract visionary designs for transforming the Plaza. The purpose of beginning the project this way was to draw local and international attention to this beautiful, underused public space, quickly generate a wide range of design solutions, raise public awareness of the Plaza's challenges and possibilities, and enable time for GAPCo to build constituency with community members and elected officials to advocate for the Plaza's rebirth as one of the city's greatest public spaces. The Reinventing Grand Army Plaza ideas competition launched in February 2008 and resulted in over 200 bold visions from around the world. A distinguished, independent jury judged the submissions through an anonymous review, and selected the top 30 proposals to be included in the public exhibit, along with the 4 prizewinning designs. Plans were on view in a free, outdoor public exhibit in the center of the Plaza where residents of the surrounding neighborhoods could envision a transformed Grand Army Plaza while standing right on site.

Following the exhibit, a final publication showcased the top design schemes and recommends steps that GAPCo and the community can take to achieve the goal of a comprehensive renovation. This book is meant to be a tool for the community, civic leaders, government officials, and concerned citizens to galvanize support for a reinvented Grand Army Plaza. Reinventing Grand Army Plaza's many proposals – and the success of the exhibit itself – convincingly made the case for a comprehensive redevelopment of this historic Plaza and awakened a sense of possibility. The NYC Department of Transportation has since implemented several key changes to the Plaza, resulting in fewer car accidents and increased foot traffic through the center of the Plaza:

- Added 1.5 acres of new pedestrian space
- A reconfigured traffic pattern
- Created new pedestrian islands
- Installed a new traffic signal to increase pedestrian access to the center of the Plaza
- Marked crosswalks with new pedestrian signage
- Added protective granite blocks as barriers to vehicular traffic
- Created new designated bike lanes

#### *Park Design for the 21st Century 2008–2011*

Produced through a four-year collaboration between the Design Trust and the NYC Parks Department, *High Performance Landscape Guidelines: 21st Century Parks for NYC* is a blueprint for sustainable design, construction, and maintenance for NYC's 29,000 acres of parkland. Part how-to manual and part advocacy tool, *High Performance Landscape Guidelines* reflects a paradigm shift in thinking about the park system as vital green infrastructure. This 270-page document guides future activity in all of New York City open space, as the Parks Department has adopted best practices in construction, maintenance, material selection and resource management as its new agency standards.

Building on the Design Trust's previous high performance guidelines, the NYC Parks Department proposed a third set of guidelines focused on promoting sustainable practices for the design, construction, and maintenance of their next generation of parks. Five Design Trust Fellows collaborated on the research and development of practical strategies and best management practices to create the Guidelines. Throughout the project, the team received invaluable contributions from dozens of Parks employees from every division and feedback from more than 40 city, state, and federal agencies and private-sector professionals who generously offered their comments as peer reviewers.



From planted traffic islands to urban forests, High Performance Landscape Guidelines promote cleaner air and water, increased biodiversity, lowered heat island effect, reduced energy usage and, of course, expanded opportunities for relaxation, recreation and environmental education for all New Yorkers. The Guidelines have been widely embraced by the local design community, earning accolades from the New York Chapter of American Society of Landscape Architects, and drawing a record crowd of over 400 people to the launch party at the Center for Architecture.

#### *Five Borough Farm 2009–present*

Five Borough Farm offers a roadmap to farmers and gardeners, City officials and stakeholders to understand and weigh the benefits of urban agriculture. This project makes a compelling case for increasing resources—from soil and compost to growing space and funding—to grow urban agriculture throughout the five boroughs of New York City. The first phase developed policy and metrics recommendations to support and grow urban agriculture in NYC in partnership with Added Value. To work towards implementation of their key policy and metrics goals, the Design Trust partnered with the NYC Parks Department on a second phase of the project. Now in its third and final phase, the Design Trust is working with Farming Concrete to scale up urban agriculture in NYC.

With Five Borough Farm, a framework was established to understand how the broad range of activities happening at the city's farms and gardens contribute to social, health, economic and ecological outcomes, and introduced a set of indicators that can be used to measure the multiple benefits of urban agriculture. These tools are the first of their kind to address the full range of urban agriculture activities and benefits, and can be used locally and nationally to demonstrate how urban agriculture can positively transform communities.

The project's first publication, *Five Borough Farm: Seeding the Future of Urban Agriculture in New York City* and companion website were released in July 2012, providing the first in-depth comprehensive overview of urban agriculture in NYC. Together they offer 30 policy recommendations to support and expand urban agriculture in all five boroughs and established the nation's first urban agriculture metrics framework so that farmers and gardeners can track their activities and demonstrate their impact.

Five Borough Farm: Phase II, conducted in partnership with the NYC Department of Parks & Recreation, builds on the policy and metrics recommendations developed in the first phase in order to strengthen and expand urban agriculture in NYC. This phase of the project's publication, *Five Borough Farm II: Growing the Benefits of Urban Agriculture in New York City*, proposes ways of better understanding and demonstrating the benefits of urban agriculture, recommends strategies for farmers and gardeners, support organizations, and government agencies to maximize these benefits, and explores the potential for expanding the types and scale of urban agriculture in the city.

During phase II, the number of food-producing farms and gardens in New York City has grown from approximately 700 to 900 over the past two years. This 28% increase is due in part to new farms and gardens, but also to the lack of coordinated data on urban agriculture in NYC. Five Borough Farm: Phase III will tackle both challenges: equipping a large number of farmers and gardeners with the first publicly accessible Data Collection Toolkit while also forging connections with the City and funding institutions to develop sustainable models of support for urban agriculture.



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Olmsted Medal Nominations  
c/o Ms. Carolyn Mitchell  
American Society of Landscape Architects  
636 Eye Street, NW  
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Re: Olmsted Medal Letter of Endorsement  
Design Trust for Public Space

Dear Ms. Mitchell:

I am writing this letter in support of the ASLA-NY's nomination of the Design Trust for Public Land for the Olmsted Medal. It is an honor that is well deserved based on the Design Trust's consistent mission since their founding in 1995.

As a past Design Trust fellow for the High Performance Landscape Guidelines: Parks for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (2011), I can attest to the critical role the trust fulfills in New York City and the design profession at large. For the Landscape Guidelines, the Trust sponsored a team of private consultants and New York City Parks Department representatives to think outside the box to foster ideas that could improve the public realm functioning in the City's 29,000 acres of Parks. The undertaking of the Guidelines facilitated a long overdue dialog about what was working and what could be done better. The process of self-examination and questioning of the status quo served as an important catalyst for change at the Parks Department. The outcome of the project was a comprehensive set of planning, design, construction, procurement, maintenance and operations guidelines that would promote sustainability systemically throughout the New York Parks system. The book stands as the first of its kind for promoting city agency sustainability on such a large scale. The project never would have been possible without the Design Trust's financial and managerial sponsorship. As part of their public mission, the guidelines were immediately made available as a free downloads for public review and use. Since the publication of the Guidelines, other New York City agencies have embraced the conceptual framework of the Guidelines and have also begun to adapt similar policies and procedures.

Over the past few years, I have been amazed when I have encountered both public and private clients across the U.S and even overseas who come to design meetings clutching dog-eared copies of the High Performance Guidelines Landscape Guidelines or the Design Trust's other crucial environmental publications like their High Performance Building Guidelines (1999), or High Performance Infrastructure Guidelines (2005). Without question, designers and public agencies outside of New York have been empowered by the examples of sustainability activism that the Design Trust has sponsored. Their books and the process that creates them are serving as road maps for other municipalities to adapt their thinking and practices for improved social, economic and environmental outcomes.

In short, the Design Trust for Public Space is truly deserving of the recognition that the Olmsted Medal conveys. The Trust's vision, leadership and initiative on municipal sustainability issues are indeed the very things that the ASLA needs to encourage and acknowledge.

Sincerely,

Andrew R. Lavalley, FASLA, RLA  
*Director of Strategic Planning*



ASLA Medal Nominations  
c/o Carolyn Mitchell  
636 Eye Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20001-3736

TO: ASLA Executive Committee,

This letter is in support of nomination of the Design Trust for Public Space for the ASLA Olmsted Medal. In every way the Design Trust exceeds the threshold standards for consideration based on its years of leadership in the areas of environmental policy, design as a tool for improving the quality of life, and stewardship of urban land.

Some years ago I was a fellow of the Design Trust and observed firsthand how project goals are formulated and pursued. While the project I spearheaded was not one of the iconic ones listed in the application, it epitomizes the solid continuum of large and small initiatives that keep the Design Trust in the forefront of promoting design dialogue, positive change and social justice. By encouraging collaboration among many allied design and planning professions, the Design Trust takes the step forward that is so often missing – action. The action may take the form of policy changes, as in the case of *Park Design for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* or urban space reform as in *Reinventing Grand Army Plaza* or advocacy for sustainable models of urban development as in the *Five Borough Farm*. Each project has become a catalyst that takes the conversation beyond “talking heads” and demonstrates how ideas can be implemented and how these ideas can be transformational to the physical and human environment.

The Design Trust recognizes that landscape architects are thought leaders who have both theoretical and practical knowledge to direct provocative projects that have a wide-ranging impact on the quality of life and human welfare in our cities. Many years ago before the notion of design collaboration was fashionable, much less practiced, the Design Trust broke the rules with regard to professional silos. Steadfastly, the Design Trust has demonstrated what great minds can achieve and how landscape architects can make a significant contribution to the urban realm. An outgrowth of the Design Trust’s initiatives is to encourage non-traditional landscape practitioners to have a seat at the table. Landscape-trained professionals who may have chosen writing, teaching, advocacy, public-sector employment or community-based design each have a role to play within the Design Trust’s umbrella of project typologies. This fact alone makes the Design Trust worthy of the Olmsted Award.

Sincerely,



Signe Nielsen, FASLA  
Principal



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RE: Olmsted Medal

Dear Selection Committee:

I am pleased to write in support of the Design Trust for Public Space as the recipient of the Olmsted Medal. The Design Trust is a champion of the public space of New York, and more significantly a leader and innovator. Their vision is that design matters—and this includes landscape design, and that design should be supported by public private partnerships, insuring that their projects are not only educational, but are a catalyst to necessary action.

While I have been a member since I came to NY in 1999, I was more recently a research Fellow working on the Five Borough Farm Project. Of the two books published, the first quantifies and describes the many farming activities ongoing in NY--making them visible. The second which I worked on, extends that research into suggestions for expanding those efforts. My chapter joined the Parks Department with the community to take advantage of underutilized open and park space for community farming and to tie that into natural systems required for growth, like pollination from native meadows, and storm water capture for water, as well as cultural systems of production and distribution. The Design Trust staff were supportive and rigorous in their review of my work, always linking me to new people and ideas for exploration. They are masters of integrating various community groups with government agencies to bring about real change. The staff is dedicated and smart -- from such a small organization they have huge impact!

Their impact has in fact made them a model for city building nationwide,--and has improved the quality of life for all New Yorkers. Projects like the High Line, Five Borough Farm, and others, show the way for a better more resilient New York and highlight the importance of landscape architecture. They are one of the more creative and unique organizations operating today and I recommend them highly for your consideration.

Sincerely,



Barbara Wilks, FASLA, FAIA  
Principal

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Selection Committee  
Olmsted Medal  
American Society of Landscape Architect  
636 Eye Street, NW  
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United States of America  
Dear Members of the Selection Committee,

For over 20 years the Design Trust for Public Space has worked to bring design to the public realm. As their 2014 Urban Design Fellow, I worked hand in hand with the organization on the Under the Elevated project, an initiative with national landscape architecture implications looking at space under elevated highways, bridges, and train viaducts.

The Design Trust makes tremendous contributions to landscape architecture with projects that improve quality of life for urban residents. The Trust was an early advocate for the preservation of the High Line helping to block its demolition in 2002. They went on to publish a report which helped city officials recognize the value of the viaduct as an urban amenity and economic generator.

Their preservation and advocacy work touches all five Boroughs of New York City. From preservation of urban gardens in the Bronx to the development of the 5 Borough Farm project - a publication related to urban gardening strategies in New York, their work is about engaging the public with the landscape.

Each year the Design Trust develops a project that engages experts across disciplines. Past President of the New York Chapter Nette Compton and recent ASLA Fellow Andrew Lavallee collaborated on the High Performance Landscape Guidelines, a guidebook for the NYC Department of Parks and Recreation for improving overall sustainability in the construction and management of urban landscapes.

As a former Urban Design Fellow and now an advisor to the organization, I understand the intelligence and reach of the not for profit. I cannot imagine a more ideal candidate and recommend the Design Trust for Public Space whole-heartedly for this award.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Susannah C. Drake".

Susannah C. Drake, AIA, FASLA  
Principal

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RE: Nomination, Design Trust for Public Space, for the Olmsted Medal

Dear Trustees,

I cannot imagine a more worthy organization in manifesting the name and ambitions of the Olmsted Medal. The Design Trust for Public Space comes as close as an organization can to having the sensibility and the vision of individual genius, but much like the legacy of Frederick Law Olmsted, its work is for the benefit of many.

In the case of the Design Trust, this is the result of the commitment by one individual, Andrea Woodner to lead an organization that has catalyzed the creative and public spirited work of hundreds of others. These professionals, advocates old and young, project fellows, partner organizations, communities and public agencies, whose efforts have proven that making public space policy better in New York City can inspire others, both nationally and internationally. Design Trusts' projects and publications have created a resource for innovation in public space and policy. As a founding board member and a former co-executive director of the Design Trust I can attest that the support for and continuing work in; [Reclaiming the Highline](#), [High Performance Infrastructure Guidelines](#), [High Performance Landscape Guidelines](#) and [Five Borough Farm](#) have, among many other initiatives spurred by the Design Trust for Public Space, created opportunities for individuals that would have never existed. Landscape architects as fellows and project partners through many initiatives from policy to specific civic spaces, have had a hand in changing the environment for sustainable design in New York City. Their expertise evolved the knowledge and use of new practices and through demonstrating the importance of design ended up effectively advocating for new ways of looking at open space resources. From [Reimagining Times Square](#) to supporting urban productive landscapes as part of the public realm, the Design Trust has taken on all issues that rise up as important to contemporary urban space and environmental sustainability.

As an organization, the Design Trust has not only been there for high profile projects such building the case for saving of the High Line and remaking NYC's Taxi but has sponsored the building of gardens by local residents for children in community gardens in disadvantaged neighborhoods in all five boroughs. It creates meaningful coalitions and relationships between public and private interests and has partnered with community boards, individuals as well as not for profit organizations such as Trust for Public Land, along with a large range of city agencies including NYC's Department of Parks and Recreation, Design and Construction, Office of Management and Budget and many, many more.

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To give the committee a taste of why the Design Trust for Public Space is so worthy of this honor I offer a brief snapshot:

Reclaiming the High Line, has become a global model for the economic benefits of saving and planting elevated railways and a major destination for residents and tourists alike. Five Borough Farm is a national model because in assisting in this case New York Cities' farmers to compile data to show their farms' productivity these tools could also show their social and health benefits. This is now adopted by farmers in all five boroughs and incorporated as an ongoing program of NYC's Operation Green Thumb. How the environment impacts people's lives; Under the Elevated - demonstrated on pop-up sites how to improve public spaces under elevated structures. This Design Trust project is about to become the city-wide "EI-Space" program in New York City which will provide new design opportunities in public space design under bridges, highways and rail lines.

Ten years ago helped the Design Trust project Achieving a Balance helped to negotiate the competing demands for developing affordable housing and preserving community gardens in the Mid Bronx and influenced city and state policy. In Designing for Security landscape architect Elizabeth Kennedy is one among many who have used the opportunity of being a Design Trust fellow to make a link between landscape architecture and public space through a project that made issues such as safety and culture connect to public design standards.

I have mentioned only a handful of reasons why the work of the Design Trust for Public Space is so worthy of a nomination for the Olmsted Medal. It is my pleasure to write in support with a most enthusiastic recommendation for this important national award.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Claire Weisz', with a long, sweeping underline.

Claire Weisz, FAIA  
Trustee - Design Trust for Public Space