

LISTEN

Justin Garrett Moore

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Good public design needs to reflect the population it serves, and in New York that is diverse, inclusive and collaborative

New York City's exceptional diversity and its ideals for the acceptance and inclusivity of all people are some of its hallmark assets. In a time when both global and national social and political climates reinforce division and inequality across a spectrum of issues and contexts, the work of articulating and building the collective values of the city and its shared resources remains necessary and must be intentional.

Since 1898, the **Municipal Art Commission of the City of New York**, now named the **Public Design Commission**, has been responsible for the oversight of the design of much of the city's public realm. New York has been shaped and reshaped in many different ways over that time, but we must acknowledge that it has not always been built for the benefit of all. For generations, elite white men decided for the most part how the city's common spaces were planned, designed, built, operated and maintained. Former New York City Planning commissioner **Robert Moses** famously made structural racism literal with his highway and park designs that bulldozed lower-income communities. The reality is that New York, like most cities, has been designed for difference: segregation in housing and schools, unequal and unjust investment in public spaces, infrastructure and services, a lack of representation of the multitude in the commons, and, of course, by reinforcing the indelible marks of the city's income and wealth inequality.

These legacy urban designs continue to affect us and also persist in new ways. With great fanfare and controversy a new public space and its object-lesson, the **Vessel**, at **Hudson Yards** have commanded attention around the question about how we are building our city's values now. I beg people to consider why so much of our collective attention is given to the pleasures and egos of wealthy white men and how they continue to see and build the world for difference, and unsurprisingly, to their benefit. Aren't we all bored and tired of this yet?

Of course, for generations, there have been people from every demographic taking a different approach to how we build our values. Here, designing for difference is rooted in identifying broad and shared values and objectives. Rather than monumentally reinforcing difference, design can be a process and a tool to systematically and positively address difference. This can mean rebalancing entrenched social or economic inequalities, or it can mean acknowledging and accommodating the varied needs and abilities



of diverse populations. It can also mean recognising that times and contexts have changed and that doing so requires our minds and hearts to confront a problematic past, present, or future collectively.

Today, the Public Design Commission better reflects the demographics of the city it serves. Moreover, the various decision-makers who plan, design and build our public realm are working to create the infrastructure and spaces for a fairer city. We can design and build for equity and justice, like at the **Peninsula** project in the **South Bronx**, where a former juvenile detention facility is being replaced by new affordable housing, public spaces, workspace and community facilities, all designed by **WXY Architecture + Urban Design** and bringing jobs to the neighbourhood. We can design and build for climate change and resilience like at the new **Hunter's Point South** neighbourhood in **Queens** (featuring a waterfront park designed by **Thomas Balsley Associates** and **Weiss/Manfredi**) that shows that a city can grow while improving its sustainability and resilience. We can design and build for gender equity and inclusion, like at New York City's **Family Justice Centers** that provide safe spaces and resources for victims and survivors of domestic and gender-based violence. We can even design and build to right the wrongs of our painful history and culture. **Mayor de Blasio's Advisory Commission on City Art**,

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Justin Garrett Moore is executive director of NYC Public Design Commission

Monuments and Markers helped the city to discuss and confront complex legacies publicly and to pave the way for the administration's **She Built NYC** initiative to correct the gender imbalance in public spaces by building new monuments honouring female trailblazers, including women of colour.

These examples show what good design can help to do, but there is one more difference that I want to highlight: the people designing our cities matters. The **AIA New York's Center for Architecture** recently hosted a conversation on the contributions of female architects, designers, builders and public servants who have helped to shape our city's built environment. The projects highlighted included things like safer and more sustainable street designs, new ways to manage and treat stormwater runoff, reinventions of library design to benefit more diverse users and engaging with communities to build lasting neighbourhood assets. Too few people highlight and speak about these projects and the people who have developed them. Women and people of colour remain significantly under-represented in the built environment fields, from design and development to decision-making, but they are doing the necessary work of designing or redesigning the difference that we need in our cities. I encourage you to seek out, celebrate, support, or to become yourself one of the people doing the same.