



Students build skyscrapers at the Center for Architecture during their summer vacation. More than 5,000 kids participate each year; many are learning to value their neighborhoods in new ways.

## Street Smarts

*Linda Yowell and James Wagman on Blue Man Group, the state of urban education, and how architecture education is creating young, passionate neighborhood advocates* **BY TRICIA DESPRES**

WITH THEIR OFFICES IN THE middle of New York's thriving Tribeca neighborhood, Hudson Studio Architects principals Linda Yowell and James Wagman are energized and inspired by the city they work in. Specializing in urban school renovation, the two talented architects continue to strive toward an environmentally conscious design approach that they know will directly and indirectly transform the lives of generations to come. Yowell and Wagman recently sat down with *Green Business Quarterly* to discuss the current state of urban

education and some of their most recent—and rewarding—projects.

**GBQ: How would you describe the state of urban education right now?**

Linda Yowell: Private, public, and charter schools are all exploring new strategies for teaching. Schools have begun to recognize that students don't learn in just one way. It is critical not only to develop students' verbal skills, but also to develop their visual skills.

**James, one of the most well-known charter schools that**

**Hudson Studio Architects worked on was the Blue Man Creativity Center in 2008. Tell us about this project.**

James Wagman: This school was founded by the founding members of the Blue Man Group and their families. Located inside a residential condo building on the Lower East Side, it's a nursery-through-first-grade school with a capacity of 60-80 kids and includes an incredible art studio and "wonder room" with an interactive disco light floor. The founders believe that art is not only a critical part of the curriculum, but also a critical part of the school environment and facilities. And we agree.

**Linda, you've worked extensively with the Center for Architecture Foundation. Can you tell us how this group came together?**

LY: The Center for Architecture Foundation uses architecture education for students in kindergarten through 12th grade, to help students develop not only visual skills, but also observation, planning, problem solving, collaboration, and all that goes into the development of our buildings and our environment. More than 5,000 students in New York City's public, private, and charter schools participate in the foundation's programs each year. The foundation's work grew out of the Learning by Design:NY committee, which was founded at the AIA NYC 20 years ago, when the NYC Board of Education drastically cut back arts education as part of intense budget cuts. We, along with many other architects, engineers, historians, and design educators, were asked to help and fill in.

**Can you discuss how architecture and education can work hand in hand for the benefit of this country's students?**

LY: We work with students at P.S. 161 in Harlem. When they began to study architecture through Learning By Design:NY,

the students were inspired by their surroundings and the landmarks they could find in their very own neighborhoods. I remember watching kids who couldn't believe anyone would put up graffiti on a piece of beautiful architecture in their own neighborhood. They began to take possession of their own places and became very positive advocates in their own communities.

**Is your design approach the same for all schools?**

JW: Each school has its own history, its own culture, and its own identity. We just completed the design of a new, state-of-the-art science facility for Packer Collegiate Institute, which is located in an extraordinary 1870s building in Brooklyn Heights. Our design respects the fabric of the school's historic building, which is cherished by the school community.

LY: We especially enjoy reworking an existing building. That's as green as it gets. We want to know what the needs are in these schools and the limitations of the existing facility. From the beginning to the end, we are directed by the needs of the client. **GBQ**

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**—LINDA YOWELL, PRINCIPAL**