

GREATER NEW YORK

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Monday, March 7, 2016 | A19

Storefronts That Show Off the City

They are ubiquitous but often ignored. They do as much to distinguish New York as any skyscraper or brash business mogul. Without them taking a walk would be a profoundly different and probably pretty dull experience.

I'm talking about storefronts. And whether they belong to a bank (well, maybe not a bank), a corner bodega, or a haute couture designer they contribute to our experience of the city in ways both obvious and subliminal.



URBAN GARDNER
RALPH GARDNER JR.

In January, Design Trust for

Public Space, a nonprofit dedicated to the future of public space in New York City, and the city Department of Housing and Development released the first comprehensive guidelines for designing ground-floor space in affordable-housing developments.

One afternoon last week I took a tour of storefronts from Harlem to the Bowery with three of the people who contributed to creating the guidelines—Susan Chin, Design Trust's executive director, and husband and wife architects James and Hayes Slade—to discover what they consider a successful storefront and whether it comports with my own uneducated eye.

Our first stop was celebrated architect David Adjaye's mixed-use 2014 housing development on St. Nicholas Avenue and West 155th Street. Part of the 13-story building's ground floor is occupied by the Sugar Hill Children's Museum of Art & Storytelling.

While the charcoal-colored building was handsome, the base of the building where the children's museum is located didn't seem like anything I'd dodge traffic to cross the street and get a better look at.

"What Design Trust is interested in," Ms. Chin explained, "is a vibrant streetscape. The sidewalk is



RALPH GARDNER JR. (2)

the largest public space, the threshold between public and private space."

Apparently, what the trio admired is the continuous glass along the ground floor. Among their guidelines are lots of glass, distinctive but not garish signage, amenities such as benches and bike racks, and equipment such as air-conditioning that are incorporated into the design rather than sticking out like a sore thumb and dripping water on your head when you walk by on a hot summer day.

"The reason these guidelines were needed," Mr. Slade explained, "is because ground-floor space isn't considered adequately. You can't understate the importance of the ground floor in relation to the housing."

They hope their study, Laying the Groundwork, will excite developers about the possibility that enlightened, flexible design can lead to increased profits.

Nonetheless, Ms. Chin admitted that the signage on the Sugar Hill Children's Museum—if there's ever an opportunity to have fun with signs and banners you'd think it would be a children's institution—was "pretty quiet. I'd say the signage is kind of lacking."

Not so a supermarket we passed on our way to our next stop. It boasted "Food



Architects Hayes and James Slade, top. Susan Chin, above, of Design Trust for Public Space.

Market" in brash red letters a couple of feet high. "There's clarity," someone in our apple-green Boro taxi joked. However, "There's not much visibility if you're trying to get somebody to go inside."

A Rite Aid pharmacy at the corner of Frederick Douglass Boulevard and West 117th Street presented a similar challenge. While it had attractive awnings and lots of windows, the glass was completely covered with wallpaper that said "Open 24 hours."

Of course, none of this is groundbreaking. Jane Jacobs nailed it more than half a century ago in "The Death and Life of Great American Cities" where, as Ms. Chin remarked, she observed that

open vibrant streets tend to be self-policing. "If you have blank walls on the street you don't get that."

Our next stop was a building on West 51st Street and 10th Avenue that provides affordable-housing units in the Clinton/Hell's Kitchen neighborhood. The ground-floor space, occupied by Baire, a hair-removal salon with maximum usage of windows, was cited in their guidelines as a successful example of transparency, that interplay of private and public space.

"You can look in and know what's happening," Mr. Slade observed. "The people attending to the store are also attending to the street."

You could see everything happening inside. Well, maybe not everything. Brazilian waxes, the store's most popular service, according to owner Michelle Roediger who joined us on the sidewalk and was curious what we were ogling, are conducted out of pedestrians' sight.

But unprovoked, Ms. Roediger testified to the "friendliness" factor of a well-designed storefront with commodious windows. "I have more neighbors here than where I live," she explained. "Very quickly we got to know a lot of people."

ralph.gardner@wsj.com