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New York's Rising Designers Are Creative While Being Socially and Environmentally Conscious

Architects Nina Kinoti-Metz, Ibrahim Greenidge and Jing Liu create healing, adaptable spaces geared toward those interact with them

By **Jennifer Tzeses**
Impressions: **720,692**



Architects are engineers of the imagination—laying the building blocks to turn dreams into reality. New York's newest rising stars are as creative as they are environmentally conscious. These are a few talents to watch.

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Ibrahim Greenidge



Growing up, buildings fascinated Ibrahim Greenidge.

“Two buildings I frequented as a child were especially absorbing: our mosque, a repurposed two-story frame house on Foster Avenue in Brooklyn, and the substance abuse clinic where my mom worked, a three-story red-brick building in need of a physical rehab. Both buildings seemed ill-suited to heal souls,” he said.

When Mr. Greenidge, 39, was 9 years old, the Crown Heights riots happened just a few blocks from his elementary school. “For the first time, I understood that people were willing to die over space,” he said. “From that tragedy, I came to believe that people who ultimately occupy a space should take part in determining its intended use and design.”

During the housing crisis of 2008, his work shifted from educational and infrastructure projects to correctional projects—architecture's complicity in the school-to-prison pipeline. “As a Black man who has witnessed friends and family incarcerated, with little rehabilitation, I saw an opportunity

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to practice social justice design,” Mr. Greenidge said. And so, he founded BOLT Architecture, a full-service firm servicing New York, New Jersey, Maryland and Michigan, which works to find ecologically friendly solutions that promote healing with sustainable materials and energy efficiency.

“Architects aren’t really seen as activists or changemakers. In BOLT’s formative years, we were committed to providing jobs and opportunities for young people, and to reposition architecture as a vehicle for changing the world. I dreamed of a place where burgeoning design professionals can feel welcomed, a place where they didn’t have to assimilate,” Mr. Greenidge said.

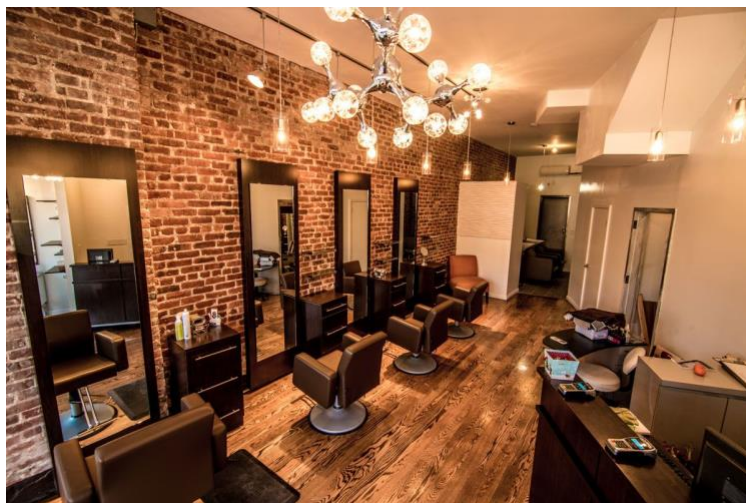
“We liken BOLT to a teaching firm, partnering with youth and education programs to improve communities through design.”

BOLT has designed smart and sustainable buildings from residential single-family homes to multifamily, commercial buildings, hospitality, education and even places of worship. Mr. Greenidge’s goal is to build “constellations of thriving sustainable communities that foster collective prosperity and health.” Currently, he’s collaborating with the New York City Housing Authority to improve deleterious conditions; medical institutions to transform hospital rooms and improve infrastructure; the Department of Design and Construction to make buildings accessible for all; and historic churches damaged by natural disasters.

“With education as one of our core values, in this phase of development, we focus on passion-based projects for homeowners and entrepreneurs,” Mr. Greenidge said.

As the city begins to emerge from the pandemic, “the desire for outdoor space and the need for better air circulation have become elements we can no longer design without. I believe that people will demand spaces with roof access, balconies, decks, porches or backyards,” he said. Mr. Greenidge is also seeing an increase in windowsill, balcony, and rooftop gardens. “People want to grow their own food and support local gardens. I believe that we will see more of this, and an increase in living green walls in office buildings and communal spaces.”

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Jing Liu



It's the gradual impact of architecture that Jing Liu, 40, is most drawn to.

“Built and intervened environments shape so much of how the earth’s resources are expended and replenished, how societies are organized and what kind of stories we tell about ourselves,” she said. “Architecture is a slow endeavor: Buildings take years to make, and a practice takes decades to form. I like that it takes time. While the impact is slow, it becomes much more complex and long-lasting as a result.”

She and partner Florian Idenburg founded SO – IL in 2008 “when the world was in an existential crisis; it seemed the right moment to try something new,” Ms. Liu said. “We were excited by the idea of instilling new energy into architecture, creating work that is agile, rich in expression and experience, but also modest in means. The challenge offered an opportunity for ambitious experimentation driven by collective thinking.”

SO – IL is known for bold international cultural projects that are playful, experiential and generous with space.

“We like to think of the language of materials, exploring the way they articulate meaning through form as well as the story of their sourcing. We often look to traditional craft for

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inspiration, resulting in unique solutions, such as our hand-crafted chainmail mesh that drapes over the Kukje Gallery in Seoul,” Ms. Liu said. “Forms embody the capacity to talk about something larger than ourselves, so we are careful to consider how the building and its surroundings might evolve over time.”

SO – IL also innovates by incorporating more common and shared space, and softening the separation between the institutional and the public, Ms. Liu said. “This approach has resulted in projects that outperform their initial functions, offering friendly and iconic spaces that serve their communities far into the future,” she said.

At the moment, SO – IL is working on a prototype of an off-the-grid adaptive reuse housing project on Governors Island, housing projects in Brooklyn, the Martin Luther King Jr. public library branch in Cleveland, a masterplan project for the Arts Precinct of Melbourne Australia, an arts campus/adaptive reuse project in northern France, two museum projects in China (UCCA Edge in Shanghai and K11 Art Center in Hong Kong), and one gallery and artist-residency space in Brooklyn, and, they are nearing completion on 450 Warren, their first multifamily project in New York City. At the master-planning scale, they are working on a competition to transform a village in Korea into a sustainable and regenerative craft, tourism and leisure destination. “I think as a society we are increasingly more open and well-versed in thinking about architecture as not a consumable stylistic practice or simply a production of buildings, but thoughtful organization of energies, materials, and narratives,” Liu said.

“As architects, we have been working very hard from the beginning on breaking the molds of collective domestic architecture. With our housing projects, we are constantly trying to address these issues: providing more outdoor circulations, more connection

between interior and the outside, and more active contribution to the community by embedding the building in its surroundings.”

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Nina Kinoti-Metz



Nina Kinoti-Metz's first career was as a fine artist in printmaking and painting. And although she loved being surrounded by art, engaging with her creative side, she found it was difficult to maintain and feel inspired over time.

"For me being creative in 3-D, spatially, instead of 2-D, was a logical pivot," Ms. Kinoti-Metz said. "Being in New York City steeps you in a wonderful constant state of exploration. Just walking the streets and going out to eat from the lowest end to the highest end, there is always something new to be discovered."

Ms. Kinoti-Metz, 41, founded Studio Parallel, a full-service architecture and design firm, in 2004 with Christopher Metz, 47, her partner in work and in life.

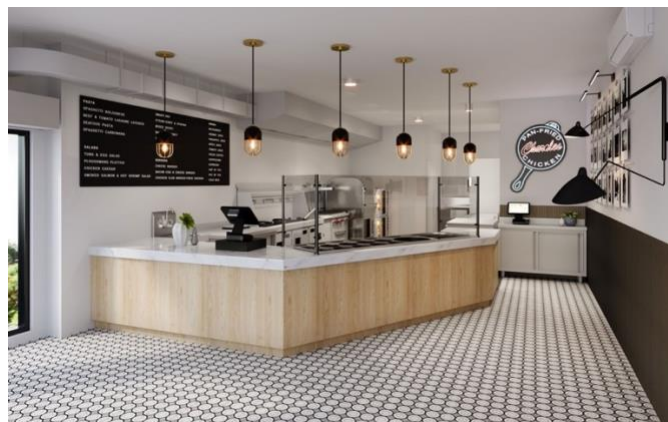
"At the time we both had been working for large architecture firms, and though we loved what we did, it was tough for us to engage in the exact type of project we wanted to," she said. "We

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started working on mostly high-end residential projects on a low-end budget, honing our skills and researching every possible angle to provide the best quality for the lowest price.” This meant re- and un-using off-the-shelf products or systems or employing construction methods etc. in unconventional ways. Since then, they’ve diversified into hospitality and commercial spaces.

These days, Ms. Kinoti-Metz is working on a new 40,000-square-foot school building in Brooklyn, three restaurants for a soul food titan in Harlem, as well as several residential interior renovation projects around the city and beyond. “Design for a residence will now be about creating a potentially adaptable space that can be easily modified, and a design aesthetic that will be comforting and forgiving,” she said.

In terms of what’s next: “I think the greening of our architecture is the next big thing, even if it has been slowly happening over time. This past year has emphasized, even more, the need for access to healthy outdoor and natural space in conjunction with living and working areas,” Ms. Kinoti-Metz said. “People will also lean into buildings with inherent technological health systems such as air filtration and purification systems that are integrated into base buildings.”



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