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Design: Look at That Building: A Series for the Architecturally Curious

The Brooklyn Condominium That's Reinventing Outdoor Common Space



This 18-unit condo is built to give every tenant plenty of windows and outdoor access.
Photos: Iwan Baan. Illustration: Stephanie Davidson

A creative complex in Boerum Hill by the architecture firm SO-IL offers a new spin on courtyard living.

By Alexandra Lange

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(This story is part of “Look at That Building,” a weekly Bloomberg CityLab series about everyday — and not-so-everyday — architecture. [Read more from the series, and sign up to get the next story sent directly to your inbox.](#))

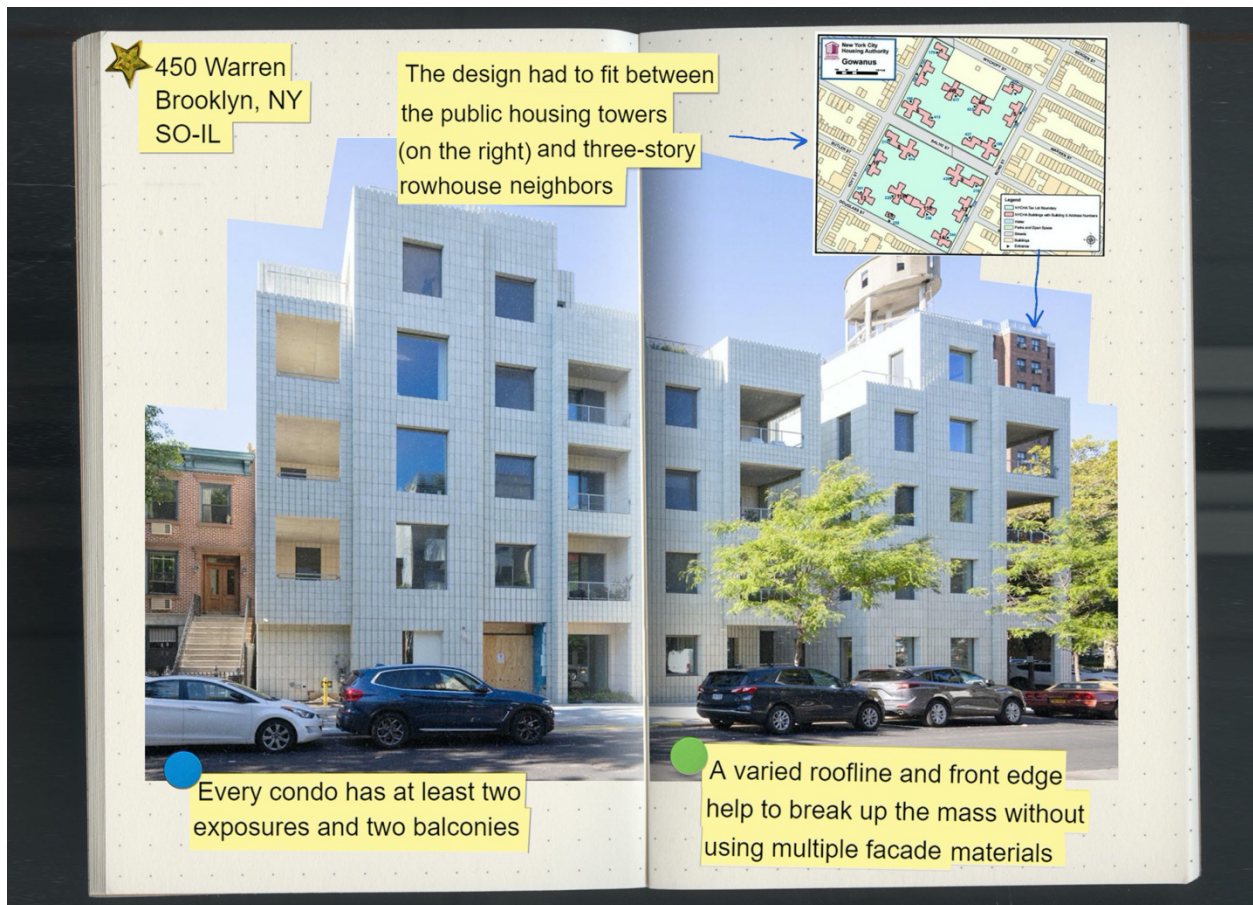
Courtyard apartments have a long history in the US, particularly in temperate climates, where shaded outdoor corridors and centralized playspaces can be year-round amenities. New York City, however, has only [selectively embraced this approach](#), with private yards and public parks taking up the slack. A new 18-unit condominium, [450](#)

October 16, 2022

Bloomberg

Warren — one of four planned Brooklyn collaborations between architects SO-IL and developers Tankhouse — aims to change that relationship, while also twisting the idea of common outdoor space into something that gets used.

Rather than creating one large courtyard, with the open space protected from the street by an L-shaped plan, SO-IL chopped up the outdoor amenities, betting that smaller, more carefully shaped and planted terraces would be more popular than a large undifferentiated expanse of grass. The building's plan reads as three towers connected by curvy concrete walkways.



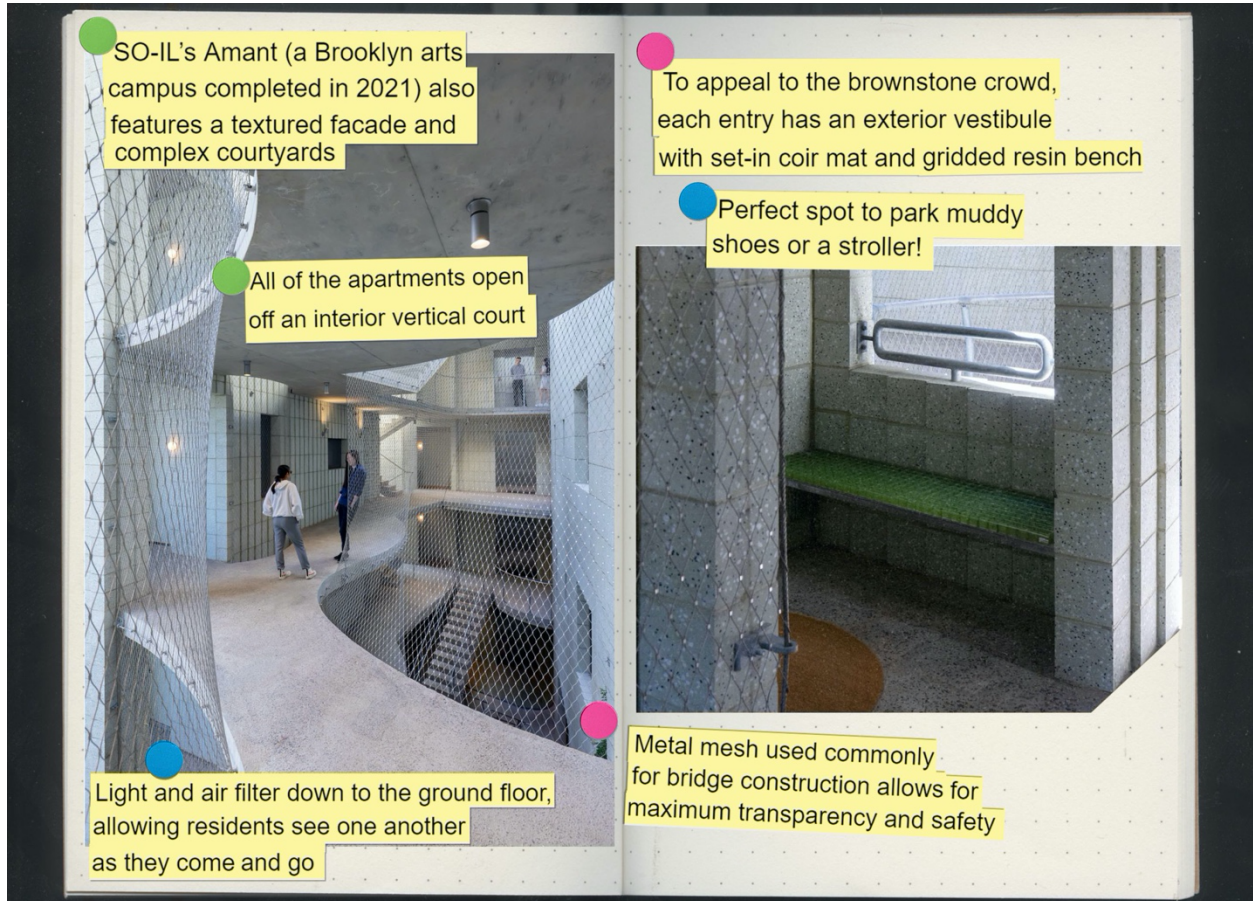
Photos: Iwan Baan. Illustration: Stephanie Davidson

The building sits across the street from the Gowanus Houses, a public housing development, completed in 1949 with towers of up to 14 stories. The area was rezoned for denser mixed-use development in 2021, but when SO-IL and Tankhouse were developing the plans, regulations limited building heights to a maximum of five stories.

October 16, 2022

Bloomberg

By breaking up the communal space in 450 Warren, the designers could give every apartment windows on at least two sides, and every living room and primary bedroom a balcony, some with spectacular views of downtown Brooklyn's new towers. Each unit is entered from a vertical open-air court, with safe passage guaranteed by floor-to-ceiling expanses of off-the-shelf wire mesh — a material more commonly seen in bridge construction. Though the plans were drawn up pre-Covid, these naturally ventilated hallways gained extra appeal during the pandemic.



Photos: Iwan Baan. Illustration: Stephanie Davidson

Dramatic use of mesh has been a SO-IL signature. An early project, Seoul's Kukje Gallery from 2012, is veiled in a custom chainmail made of hundreds of thousands of metal rings. Founding partners Jing Liu and Florian Idenburg met while working for the Japanese architecture firm SANAA, and founded their practice after completing the New Museum in New York, known for its industrial aluminum mesh façade.

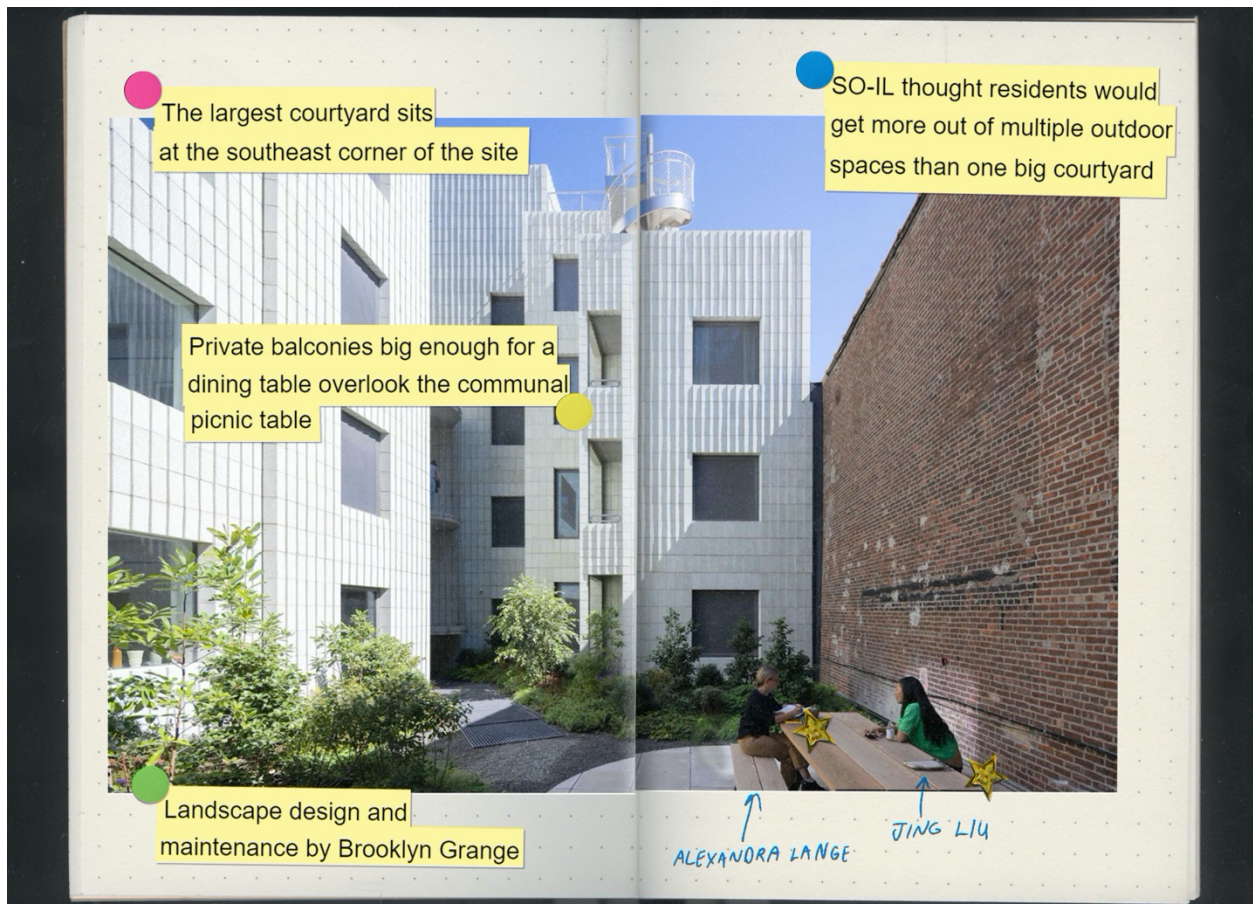
Additional details seem specifically directed at the brownstone Brooklyn market. Each apartment has an exterior foyer, with a round, set-in coir mat and a gridded resin bench: a drop zone for the mess of shoes and strollers and umbrellas that inevitably

October 16, 2022

Bloomberg

accumulates around the front door. The doors are also double-hinged, with one large and one small panel; Liu suggests that neighbors could leave the small panel open for airflow and ease of children moving back and forth between indoor and outdoor spaces.

“We thought initially about trying to create a building that is livable, incentivizing community-building,” says Sebastian Mendez of Tankhouse, the development firm he founded with Sam Alison-Mayne. “It was clear from the beginning that families were at the center of it. A building can have communal spaces where kids can play without one having to worry about where they are.” Mendez is practicing what he preaches: He ended up buying a unit for his family of four.



Photos: Iwan Baan. Illustration: Stephanie Davidson

The largest communal space sits on the second story of the west side of the building. Private terraces, large enough for rectangular dining tables, are stacked off to one side, while it is furnished with picnic tables and lined (like all the outdoor spots) with plants from Brooklyn Grange; vines clamber up a two-story chain-link wall, muffling street noise and greening the view across the street.

October 16, 2022

“We took a different approach to quality of life,” Mendez says — one that emphasizes light and air over technology and gimmicks. That said, the architects did take the broker note that the kitchens must have marble countertops.

Sited on the corner of a block with rowhouses and light industrial buildings, 450 Warren stands out thanks to its gray-green exterior concrete block, made in Turkey, with black and white exposed aggregate. In the apartments’ vestibules, the blocks are set flush, but on most exterior walls they are canted, creating a scale-like effect and dramatic stripes of vertical shadow.

“We are happy for people to create their own concept of living,” says SO-IL’s Jing Liu. “We never think, ‘Oh, that’s a Mediterranean feeling’ or ‘Oh, that’s a Caribbean feeling.’ Spatially, this is more like co-housing than a co-op.”

Mendez admits that New York City doesn’t have a great track record with balconies. If you look at many of the 1960s high-rises from the highway, you see as many balconies used as closets as you do spaces to relax. “I wouldn’t want to be up on the 10th floor with a glass railing designed for Miami,” he says. “You need space that allows for people to feel individual and private, and others for them to come together and congregate.”

Alexandra Lange writes for Bloomberg.