

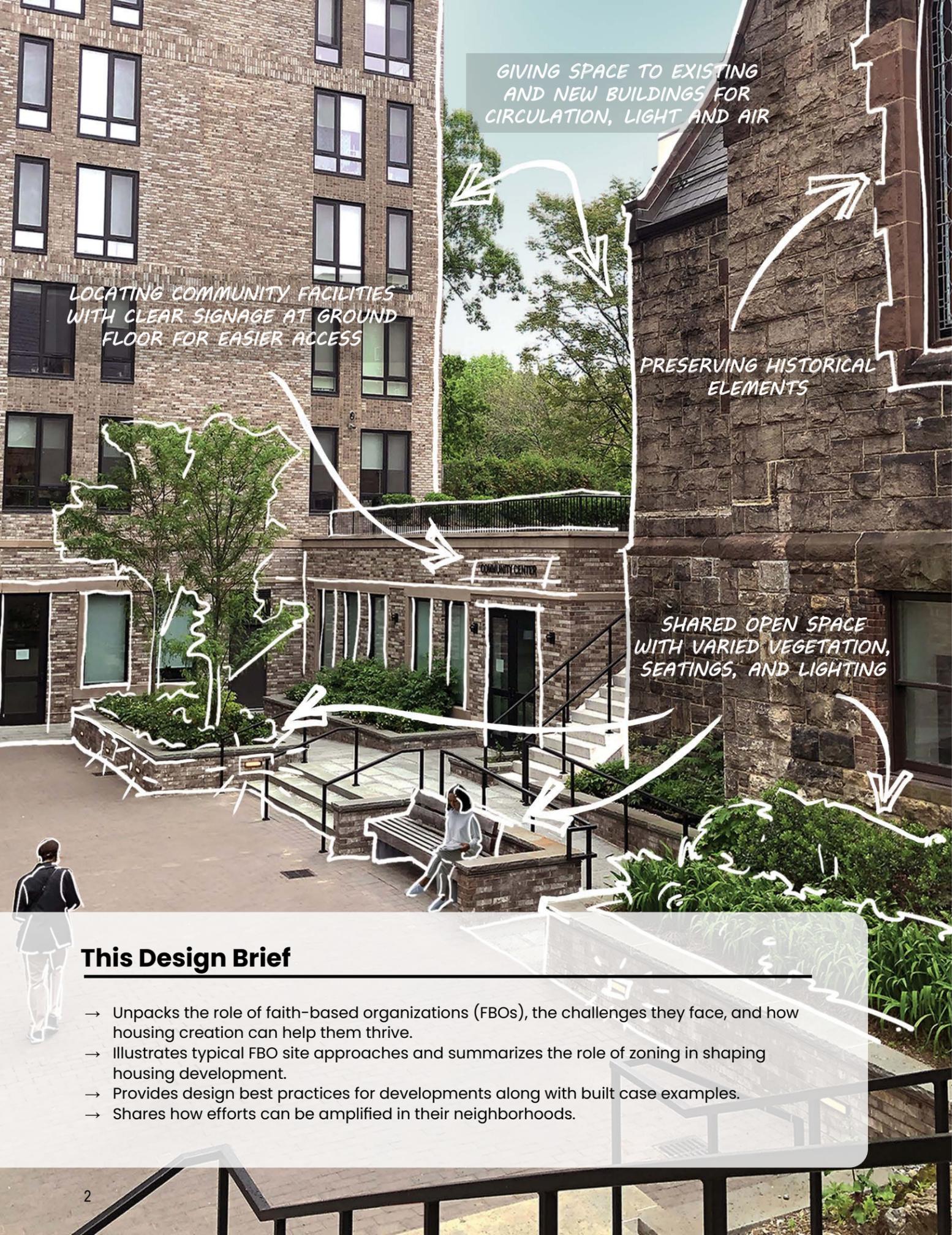
Urban Design in Brief

Best practice guides to help improve everyday life in New York City through design

Faith-Based Organizations and Housing Development

NYC
PLANNING

A tool to explore key trends and policies shaping the built environment in NYC and share urban design guidance that can support good planning outcomes.



GIVING SPACE TO EXISTING AND NEW BUILDINGS FOR CIRCULATION, LIGHT AND AIR

LOCATING COMMUNITY FACILITIES WITH CLEAR SIGNAGE AT GROUND FLOOR FOR EASIER ACCESS

PRESERVING HISTORICAL ELEMENTS

SHARED OPEN SPACE WITH VARIED VEGETATION, SEATINGS, AND LIGHTING

This Design Brief

- Unpacks the role of faith-based organizations (FBOs), the challenges they face, and how housing creation can help them thrive.
- Illustrates typical FBO site approaches and summarizes the role of zoning in shaping housing development.
- Provides design best practices for developments along with built case examples.
- Shares how efforts can be amplified in their neighborhoods.

Introduction

This inaugural brief examines how faith-based organizations (FBOs) are redeveloping their properties to add housing and how new zoning regulations can support these efforts. It also provides urban design recommendations based on successful real-world examples.

Grounded in site visits, design workshops, and stakeholder conversations, and guided by NYC's *Principles of Good Urban Design*, this brief shows how high-quality, community-focused design can advance FBOs missions, support the communities they serve, and benefit the surrounding neighborhoods and city.



How Can Housing Help Faith-based Organizations Thrive?

The Role of FBOs in Communities and the Challenges They Face

Faith-based organizations, such as churches, mosques, synagogues, temples, and other facilities, have been pillars of New York City neighborhoods for generations. These institutions help bring people together and form strong social networks. They provide spaces for worship, learning, food distribution, shelter, and other essential community services.

However, many FBOs face mounting pressures, including upkeep for aging buildings and infrastructure, budget constraints, and declining congregations as members age or move due to housing costs or other reasons.

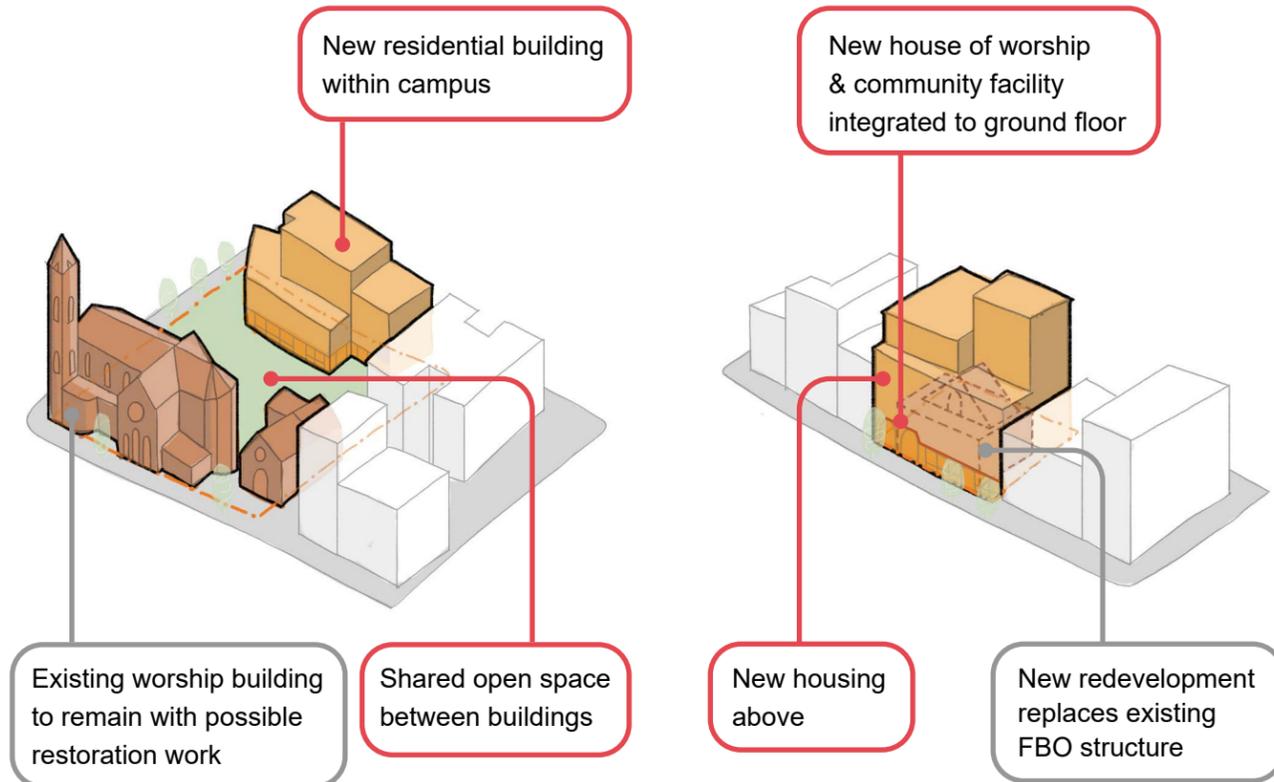
Despite these challenges, FBOs remain deeply embedded in New York City's urban fabric. According to NYU Furman Center, they collectively own over 84 million square feet citywide — more than the size of two Central Parks. However, over 80% of the available floor area is unused.¹

Thoughtful redevelopment offers an opportunity to change that. It can generate sustainable income streams to support FBO operations and advance their missions, such as providing housing and vital social services, or creating new spaces for worship, community engagement, and social impact. Residential redevelopment also offers an important means to tackle the city's housing shortage, benefiting the very communities these institutions serve.

1. Been, Vicki, Helen Ketema, and Matthew Murphy. "Building Homes on Faith-Based Owned Land: State-Led Approaches to Increasing Housing Supply." NYU Furman Center, April 2025.

Typical FBO Site Approaches for Housing Development

FBO housing developments generally fall into two categories: infill and new build. Infill often happens on larger campuses that may encompass a full city block or even multiple blocks. New build redevelopment typically happens on smaller lots in denser parts of the city.



Infill Sites

- Lots generally larger than 20,000 SF
- Variety of existing buildings with uses such as house of worship, facilities like rectories or convents, and parking lots
- Existing structures are often landmarked and remain on site
- More attention toward site planning for better relationships between existing and new buildings
- High potential for supportive services and shared community spaces

New Build Sites

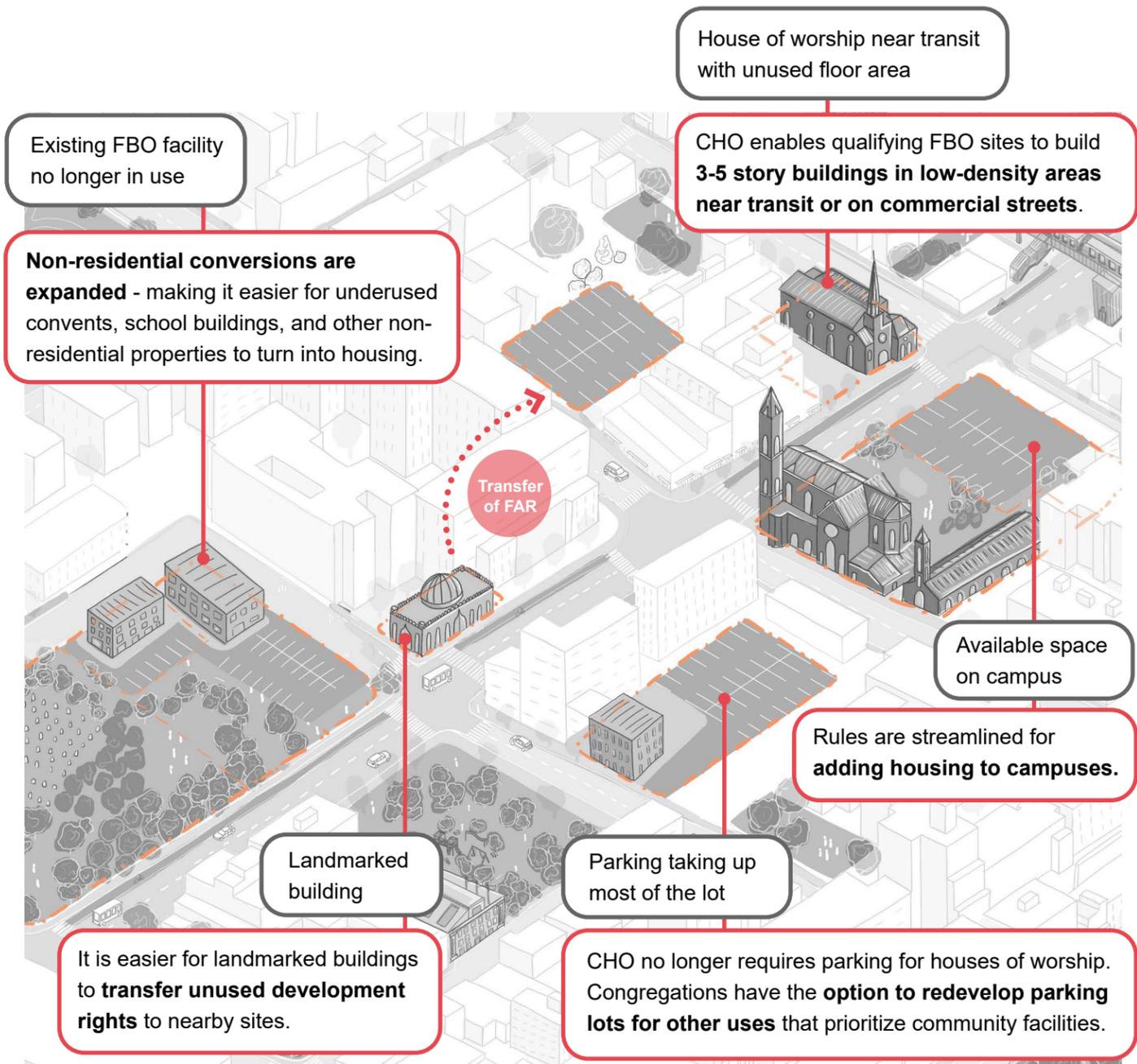
- Lots range from 6,000 SF to 20,000 SF on average
- Often located in denser areas and have underutilized floor area
- Existing structures are not landmarked and may be replaced
- Offers opportunities to integrate houses of worship into ground floor spaces of new developments
- Calls for more attention to building, interior design, and ground floor activation

The Role of Zoning in Shaping FBO Housing

Zoning regulates how land is used – for housing, businesses, open spaces, or industrial purposes. It sets limitations on the size and use of buildings, where they may be located, and the density of the city's neighborhoods.

City of Yes

In December 2024, New York City passed *City of Yes for Housing Opportunity*, the biggest zoning code update since 1961. Designed to help tackle NYC's housing crisis, *City of Yes* modernizes and streamlines restrictive zoning rules, making it possible to create a little more housing across the entire city. It includes provisions that give FBOs additional flexibility and tools to develop housing on their land, making it easier for FBOs to develop housing on their properties if they choose to do so.





Best Practice 1

Celebrate History and Architectural Heritage

Many religious organizations occupy buildings that serve as cultural and community anchors and contribute to the identity and architectural quality of their neighborhoods. Redevelopment can provide opportunities to thoughtfully reflect and build upon these existing qualities, further strengthening the connection between past and present and reinforcing a unique sense of place.

Key Considerations

→ Site Planning and Sightlines

Consider building form and arrangement to emphasize religious architectural features, such as steeples, towers, minarets, and others. Maintain eye level visual connection to these important religious architectural elements.



→ Care for the Past

Identify significant architectural elements for possible preservation or restoration that celebrate an FBO's identity and uphold the area's history.



→ Architectural Features and Forms

In designated historic neighborhoods, complement the unique character of a place with attention to architectural form, details, material, and style.



Case Studies



Location: 959 Sterling Place, Brooklyn
Year Built: 2023 | **Units:** 158 | **Type:** Infill

Located within the Crown Heights North Historic District next to the Hebron Seventh Day Adventist School, this new residential building's takes design cues from the adjacent landmarked facility, echoing the highs and lows of the pointed arches. Material choices—such as darker metals, red brick, and large, elongated windows—reflect the architectural character of both the adjacent building and the surrounding historic context.



Location: 249 Willoughby Ave, Brooklyn
Year Built: 2023 | **Units:** 138 | **Type:** Infill

The Parish House building in Clinton Hill demonstrates sensitivity to its neighbor, St. Mary's Episcopal Church. The new residential building is set back to preserve views of the church's spire, which serves as an important historic and symbolic architectural element in the neighborhood. This approach also opens up space for landscaping, supporting outdoor gathering and natural light for both structures.



Best Practice 2

Prioritize Ease of Access at Points of Entry

Accessible and welcoming entryways help create inclusive environments for residents, congregation members, and the broader community. As FBO sites evolve to include housing, thoughtful entry design can help ensure these spaces remain recognizable, approachable, and aligned with the organization's mission of hospitality and service.

Key Considerations

→ Direct Entrances

Position entrances where they are clearly visible from the sidewalk. Distinguishing and thoughtfully placing residential and community entrances can help orient different user groups.



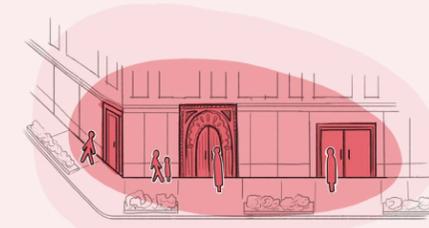
→ Wayfinding and Identity

Use clear visual cues, like signs, symbols, colors, and other design elements, to ease navigation and clearly announce an organization's presence to the wider neighborhood.



→ Right-sized Entryways

Design entryways to accommodate peak activity, such as religious services or large gatherings, to ensure smooth circulation and avoid congestion.



Case Studies



Location: 64 Norfolk Street, Manhattan
Year Built: 2021 | **Units:** 117 | **Type:** New Build

Located on the Lower East Side, the Beth Hamedrash Hagodol Synagogue reestablished its presence after a catastrophic fire. The new building utilizes full-height glass at the ground floor to maximize light and visual connection to the Synagogue and gallery inside. Spacious sidewalk clearance and bigger door openings accommodate the large volume of people during times of service.



Location: 40 Morningside Drive, Manhattan
Year Built: 2014 | **Units:** 430 | **Type:** Infill

The new apartment development adjacent to the Cathedral of St. John Divine utilizes urban design strategies to sculpt building form and enhance the entryway experience. A tall arched entryway and grand staircase links the transept of the church to the sidewalk at the street level. By dividing the residential structure into two buildings, a new entryway provides for ease of circulation during large events, while allowing for more light, air, and pedestrian views to the existing structure.



Best Practice 3

Design Open Spaces for Connection

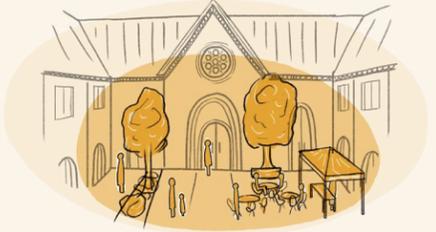
On large FBO sites, redevelopment can create opportunities for new outdoor spaces that support gathering, rest, and connection to nature for residents and visitors alike. By dedicating the spaces in-between buildings for communal use, FBOs can foster more integrated and active community hubs.

Key Considerations



→ Landscape and Furnishings

Investing in planting, lighting, and seating can help create a welcoming, human scale environment. These elements make large developments feel more inviting from the sidewalk.



→ Shared Open Spaces

Open and accessible gathering areas encourage community interaction while mitigating possible operational clashes between programs at various times.



→ Programming and Site Planning

On larger campus-style sites, consider how the layout of buildings can improve movement through the site by bringing in natural light, and supporting healthy, well-ventilated spaces. Aligning walkways with the existing street grid can help integrate campuses to surrounding neighborhood.

Case Studies



Location: 2520 Jerome Avenue, Bronx
Year Built: 2023 | **Units:** 102 | **Type:** Infill

The St. James Terrace redevelopment — a mixed-income affordable housing project with 50% permanent supportive housing — introduced a courtyard benefiting both housing residents and congregants of the St. James Episcopal Church. The shared open space supports both quiet respite and active programming, such as food pantries or celebrations. New community facilities wrap around the courtyard at the ground-floor level, promoting shared light and visual connection.



Location: 37 Hillside Avenue, Manhattan
Year Built: 2023 | **Units:** 164 | **Type:** New Build

This project is a 100% affordable senior housing development that provides community facilities for Rocky Mount Baptist Church. Working with the site's sloping terrain, the design embeds the church into the hillside and brings green vegetation into the residential community facilities above. The thick roof that separates the religious and residential uses acts as an open courtyard, strategically bringing natural light down to the worship space via skylights and providing residents with open air space for socializing.



Best Practice 4

Greet the Street with Community Uses

FBO redevelopment offers a chance to reimagine underused spaces and create much-needed community facilities to support surrounding communities. At the ground floor, thoughtful design can strengthen the relationship between institutions and surrounding neighborhoods with clearly oriented entrances, transparent facades, and accessible public-facing spaces.

Key Considerations

→ Street Frontages

Concentrate more active programs, community facilities or commercial uses toward main thoroughfares to best support reach and visibility. Consider orienting more passive uses like housing along side streets.



→ Facade Articulation

Use a variety of materials, forms and detailing along the lower portions of buildings to create a visually connected and welcoming environment.



→ Ground Floor Activation

Advocate for complementary programs that promote use at various times beyond the regular religious schedules and match the needs of the community and FBO.



Case Studies



Location: 1485 5th Avenue, Manhattan
Year Built: 2007 | **Units:** 206 | **Type:** Infill

With a longstanding history in Harlem, the Beth Gospel Assembly redeveloped a corner portion of their site to serve as the congregation's new home. The building has a strong physical presence at the street level through the use of articulated walls that showcase the multi-level atrium inside. The bold and dynamic facade fronts an expanded sidewalk, providing opportunities for seating and rest before and after services and events.



Location: 1074 Washington Avenue, Bronx
Year Built: 2020 | **Units:** 154 | **Type:** New Build

The Trinity Reverend William M. James Senior Building was developed after United Methodist Church relocated within its parish. The new building provides 100% affordable housing for seniors and includes a nonprofit serving formerly incarcerated New Yorkers. The community facility is prominently located at the corner, with a fully transparent glass facade and clear signage, ensuring a visible and welcoming presence on the street.

Best Practices In Neighborhoods

Many faith-based organizations are deeply woven into the fabric of their surrounding neighborhoods. FBO buildings, both old and new, often stand prominently and contribute to the identity of their surroundings. Thoughtful design can help newly developed buildings welcome new residents and have wider impacts such as improving walkability, expanding shared spaces, and fostering a stronger sense of community for the neighborhood at large.

Faith-based Organizations with landmarked buildings could take advantage of **TDR (Transfer of Development Rights)** to allow creation of housing on surrounding sites.

Adding community facility spaces, housing, or retail can help support rehabilitation costs for existing historical structures.

Transfer of FAR

Introducing **pedestrian paths, wayfinding elements or public programs** can help connect an FBO to the surrounding community.

Consider access to public transit from adjacent sidewalks and existing ground floor activities of the block.

Explore the **creation of open spaces** that could help address health and climate issues.

Envision possibilities for open space on properties that cannot be built upon, such as cemeteries or historic monuments.

Cooperate with other **local, institutional, and mission-driven partners** to shape a development that could address community needs.

Working with community groups, schools, or other institutions in the community can be vital for an active ground floor use.

Acknowledgments

Special Thanks

We would like to acknowledge and thank all of those that contributed to conversations, site visits, and sharing of experiences around FBOs. We appreciate those involved in the design and development of these organizations, their hard work and dedication to improving the presence of these facilities down on the ground, and their input to this design brief.

Design Firms

- Morris Adjmi Architects
- Curtis + Ginsberg Architects
- SLCE Architects
- FX Collaborative

NYC Agencies

- The Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC)
- Department of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD)

Faith-Based and Community Organizations

- Members of Rocky Mount Baptist Church
- Members of St. James Episcopal Church
- Concern Housing

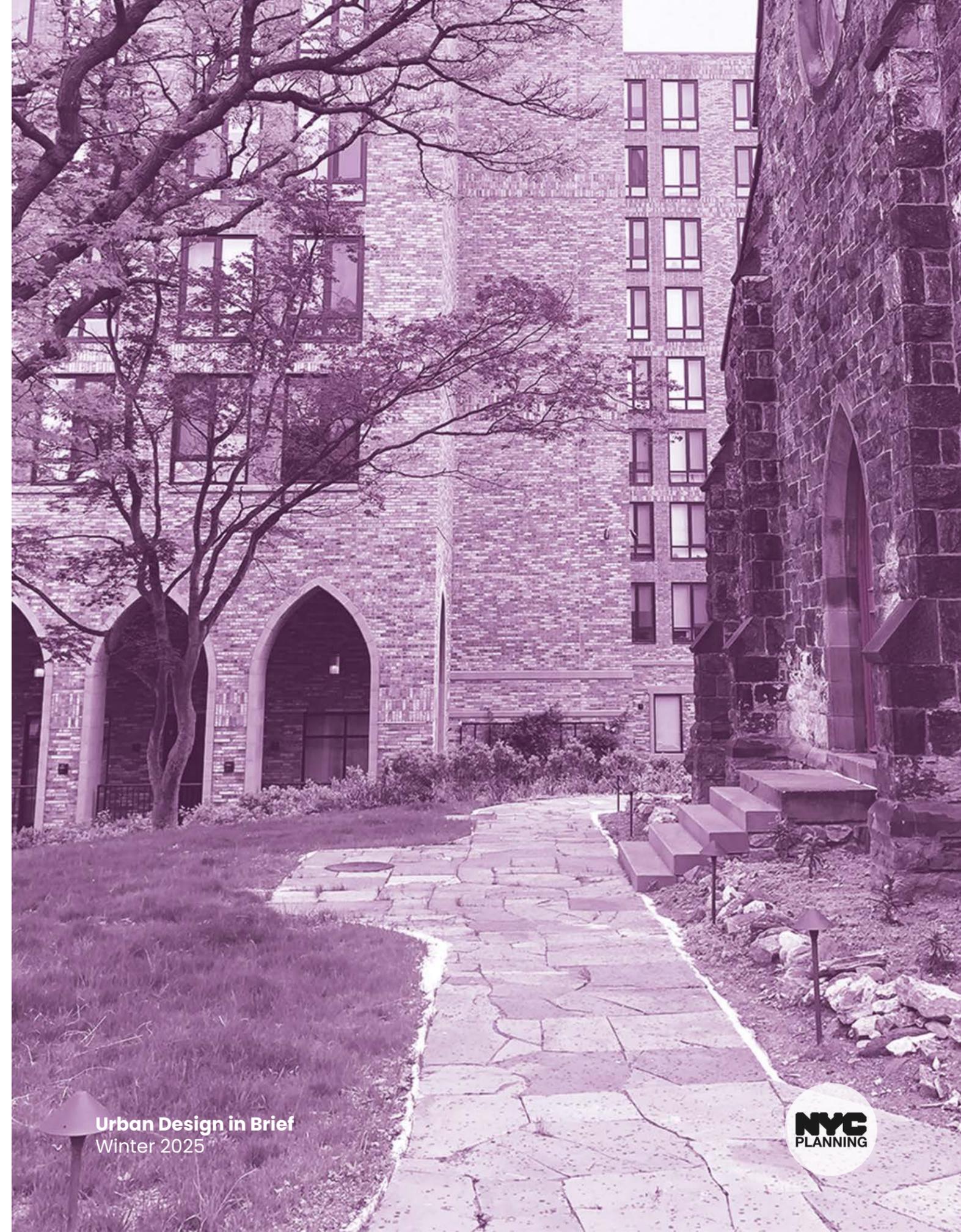
To Learn More

Further Resources and Guides

- [City of Yes for Housing Opportunity](#)
- [Principles of Good Urban Design](#)
- [Furman Center Research](#)
- Bricks and Mortals: [Housing Case Studies](#)
- Enterprise: [The Faith-Based Development Guides](#)
- HPD: [Mission Driven Partnerships](#), [Design Guidelines](#)
- LPC: [Discover NYC Landmarks](#)
- [Historic Tax Credit Programs](#)
- [Faith-Based Affordable Housing Act State legislation](#)

Readings and Recordings

- Been, Vicki, Helen Ketema, and Matthew Murphy. "Building Homes on Faith-Based Owned Land: State-Led Approaches to Increasing Housing Supply." NYU Furman Center, April 2025.
- "Fostering Neighborhoods: Faith-Based Organizations and the Development of Affordable Housing." Federal Reserve Bank of New York, April 2024. https://www.newyorkfed.org/newsevents/events/regional_outreach/2024/0425-2024.
- "How History and Housing Go Hand in Hand An Annotated List of New Housing and Historic Buildings, Showcasing Best Practices and Vital Opportunities." The Historic Districts Council (HDC), January 2025.
- Murphy, Matthew, Hayley Raetz, Sarah Internicola, and Tony Bodulovic. "Institutional Owned Land and New York City's Housing Crisis: The Extent of Faith-Based Owned Land Ownership." Web log. NYU Furman Center (blog), April 24, 2024.



Urban Design in Brief
Winter 2025

