Oasis in Limestone and Brick
A community center grows in Brooklyn.

Among the aging bodegas, discount shops, and anonymous towers of Bedford-Stuyvesant in Brooklyn, hard by the Saratoga Village public-housing project, one building stands out. On first impression, the Saratoga Avenue Community Center comes across as a hip adobe pueblo: its myriad elevations are simultaneously angular and irregular, arresting yet unobtrusive. “It’s a function of wanting to make something that fits as comfortably as possible with the community,” says its architect, George Ranalli, M.Arch. ’74, “but also exists as something in its own right.”

The structure was a departure for Ranalli, dean of the Spitzer School of Architecture at City College of the City University of New York. It was his first fully freestanding work built from scratch, erected in this case on an inauspicious

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lar yet utterly dissimilar, they are playfully juxtaposed from side to side like two-dimensional building blocks. When sunlight plays through, the overall effect is inviting and accommodating—designed, as the architect puts it, “to resonate with people on the feeling level first.”

The son of Italian immigrants from the Bronx, Ranalli appreciates the power of community input. During Saratoga’s lengthy planning process, neighborhood residents reviewed the materials that would ultimately be used in its construction: limestone, iron-flecked orangy “roman” bricks (thinner and longer than usual), glass-fiber reinforced concrete (commonly known as GFRC casting stone), mahogany for the front doors and window frames. “It was an unusual palette for the Housing Authority,” Ranalli acknowledges. “They’re used to aluminum and stainless steel.” But the locals were delighted. “They said, ‘We’re actually going to get a building that’s made of this?’”

In its two years, Saratoga has been a local hit. It routinely offers nursery, day-care, after-school, and senior-citizens programs, as well as an urban summer camp. But residents also use the main hall for wedding receptions, graduation fêtes, and other purely celebratory get-togethers. “The response has been tremendous,” Ranalli says. “They fight to have their parties here. At a party six or eight months after the opening, people were saying, ‘We just can’t believe that we have this.’ This is what you make buildings for. It’s the framework in which people live their lives.” —THOMAS VINCIGUERRA