

FILL IN THE BLANK:

Stephen Yablon lets us pick his architectural brain

Stephen Yablon knew from early on that he was destined to be a New Yorker. “The diversity of people here and the opportunity to reinvent yourself—you don’t have that anywhere else,” he says.

After working under legendary architect I.M. Pei and Gwathmey Siegel, Yablon founded his own firm, Stephen Yablon Architects, in—you guessed it—New York. Recent projects include the award-winning Central Harlem STD Clinic and the Betances Community Center and Boxing Gym in The Bronx. Here, Yablon plays Fill in the Blank with us, sharing his process, surprising passion (hint: it has nothing to do with architecture), and what he has his sights set on next.

*By Brian Libby
Photos by Matthew
Williams and
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I CONSTANTLY HAVE:
An ongoing sketchbook.

WHAT I LOVE ABOUT ARCHITECTURE:
“Is that it’s an art, even though it has all these practicalities and functional problems you have to solve. Architecture communicates to us who we are. Sometimes it’s supposed to be joyful, sometimes somber, sometimes public, sometimes solitary. It’s how well you communicate an idea. I enjoy the process of getting to that.”

MY FAVORITE BOOK IS:
“*War and Peace*. I love the contrast between everyday life and these giant historical events, like Napoleon’s invasion of Moscow. Plus, it reads like a soap opera. Tolstoy is a real storyteller.”

OUTSIDE OF ARCHITECTURE, I LIKE TO:
“Go surfing—I’m fairly obsessed. I grew up doing it, I stopped for 25 years, and then I learned that you could do it in the New York area. It’s freedom, escape, and feeling one with this pulse of energy for a few seconds. And the design of surfboards is fascinating. They’re extremely subtle little vehicles.”

MY ARCHITECTURE HERO IS:
“Louis Kahn, for his ability to create profound public spaces and his ability to integrate history and local culture into modern architecture. That was a very profound thing that still resonates with me.”

WITHIN ARCHITECTURE, I CURRENTLY LIKE:
“Glenn Murcutt or Patkau Architects with their modernist interpretation of place and sensitivity to local climate. On the other hand, I also admire

the boldness and technical invention of Hertzog & DeMeuron and Gehry.”

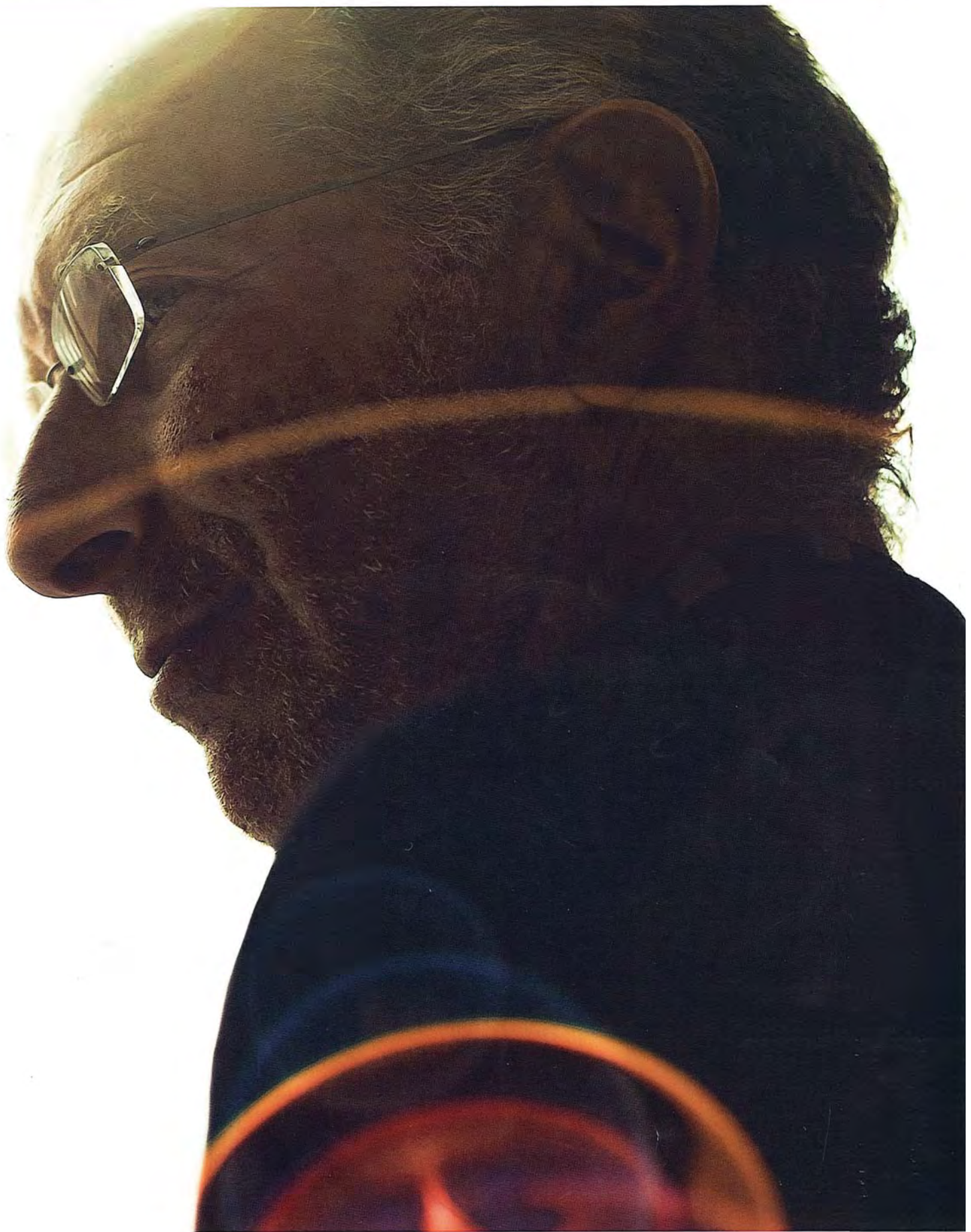
WHEN DESIGNING FOR A COMMUNITY, YOU NEED TO:
“Design public places to gather. Look at Egypt—it was about gathering in the square. It’s the oldest thing in the world. No technology can kill the need for places of public gathering, places that reinforce community. Being modern is being part of the community, but also part of the greater world, so there’s views outward from the enclosed space. You need to have that connection to your past, but you don’t want to be constrained. You want to be able to partake of all the advantages in the modern world.”

MY FAVORITE ARTIST IS:
“Sol Lewitt. Also the Russian Supremacists and constructivists—the sheer inventiveness and the ability to communicate with these minimal means.”

SOMETIMES MY ROLE IS:
“As a designer and other times it’s more of an editor: to keep things moving towards a strong idea. I enjoy pushing people beyond what they think they can do creatively.”

NEXT, I’M WORKING ON:
“A renovation of an historic art-deco community health-center building in New York. It’s going to be the largest STD clinic in the country. These community public health centers were built in the 1930s during the New Deal, and some of the best architects were hired as a way of expressing the city’s commitment to public health, but they’ve fallen into disrepair. We’re upgrading these places to allow them to deliver state-of-the-art healthcare.” ❖

Right: Stephen Yablon in his office in New York City





DESIGNED BY STEPHEN YABLON

The Center for Student Affairs, Columbia University, New York

When Yablon was designing a new home for the department on the Columbia University campus, he wanted to be sure it was meaningful to the Ivy League school and to the students who attend it. "We look for a simple move that can kind of have a poetic resonance about who the client is and what the site is, but work on a functional level, as well."

So Yablon paid homage to a design found in the most iconic space on campus—the library. He used the paving pattern in front of Low Library, on the steps where students sit outside and gather, as inspiration for the flooring and perforated metal walls within the new student center. "We said, 'Let's take that and interpret it!'"

The wall in the student center is made from a powder-coated, perforated steel panel with a reflective stainless surface behind it. "The idea is the students see themselves reflected in the pattern—an appropriate image for the department that guides the students through the university experience."

Above: Columbia University Division of Student Affairs