



# WHERE WE GET STRONGER



**LEFT**

The lush, layered design of the new entrance wall at Boston Children's Hospital creates a sense of invitation and discovery.



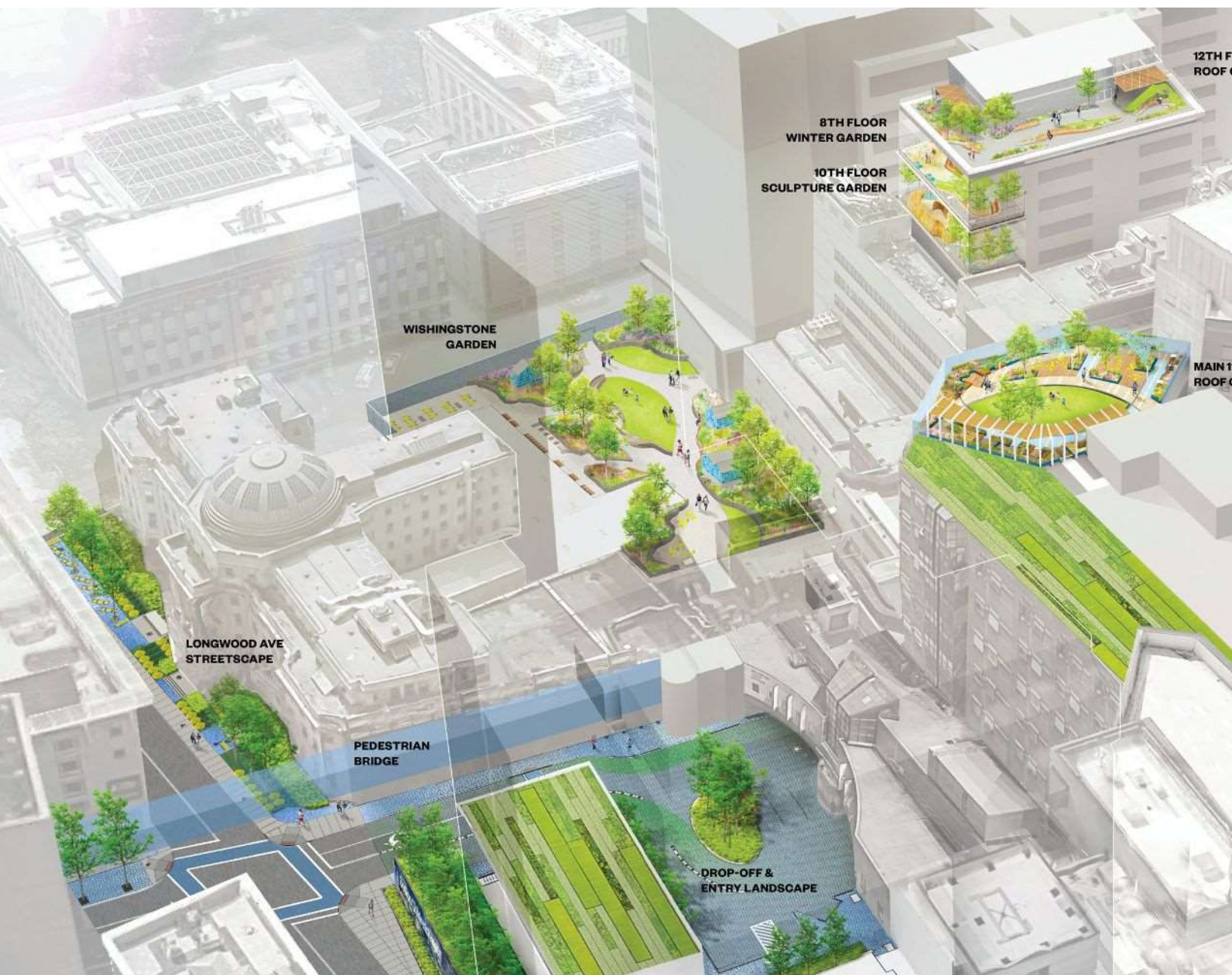
ANTON GRASSL

## AN EXPANDING RANGE OF PROJECTS CAPS A YEAR OF MILESTONES AT MIKYOUNG KIM DESIGN.

BY KIM O'CONNELL

**IN THE HEART** of downtown Boston, only a few blocks from Fenway Park and the Charles River, Boston Children's Hospital feels like a world unto itself. Hospitals often feel this way because of their nature as places where some of life's weightiest events happen—births, deaths, life-saving surgeries and treatments. At Boston Children's, these things are infused with the deep concern that attends this special population, where the stakes are as high as they could ever be. Each family, each patient, each story feels unique and profound.

In developing a series of gardens for the hospital, it was important to the landscape architect Milkyoung Kim, FASLA, that the designs reflected all the complexities intrinsic to this environment. For Kim, it was not a place for conventional thinking about



childhood, where a designer could include bright colors and animal pictures and call it a day. Instead, Kim and her colleagues at Mikiyoung Kim Design (MYKD) applied their many years of studying human behavior. The hospital gardens manifest the firm's long-held practice of conducting its own scientific research and collecting evidence as an underpinning of design. Informed by the firm's study of biology, neuroscience, and human emotion, the hospital gardens are not just places for play and release, where children and their families can push away the hardest emotions, but also for fear and grief. Because humans live in those emotional realms, too.

“What patients have told us, and we’ve done three different hospital projects across eight years, is that history is a great comfort to people, because they feel like there’s some things that are durable, that are stable,” Kim says. “And then there’s other kinds of systems, like ecological systems, which are comforting as well, even though they’re changing. Their very changeability, like the seasons, also brings comfort to people.”

Mikiyoung Kim Design, which is celebrating its 30th anniversary this year, has a diverse portfolio of public and private projects at a range of scales, including the restoration and daylighting of the

**ABOVE**  
The design for a series of gardens at Boston Children's provides spaces for solace, gathering, and play for patients, families, and caregivers.



**ABOVE**  
Circulation and free-form play areas were essential for the hospital's Main 11 roof garden.

Cheonggye River in Seoul, South Korea; a new 37-acre park in Houston; the first LGBTQIA+ senior living community in Massachusetts; and an undulating landscape of discovery at the Chicago Botanic Garden. Underscored much of this work, and the dozens of other master plans and built projects the firm has helped, is a commitment to healing, especially in a post-pandemic world. In recognition of this, ASLA awarded MYKD the 2022 Firm Award.

"The entirety of the practice centers community engagement at all scales," wrote Deborah Marton, the executive director of the New York-based Van Alen Institute, in a letter nominating MYKD for

the award. "Ultimately the compelling work that emerges from this intellectual rigor and depth has set a new standard for human centered placemaking."

To do this work, the firm draws together relevant research in the neurosciences before every project and seeks to gather original data as well, often partnering with academics and subject matter experts. For Boston Children's, the firm worked with researchers at Cornell University to do post-occupancy studies and is currently examining the project's inclusiveness for neurodiverse populations with Gareth Doherty, ASLA, an associate



professor of landscape architecture at the Harvard Graduate School of Design. Both for the hospital and in preparation for future work, the firm is also researching the impact of noise on the health and well-being of urban dwellers with Carl Giegold at Threshold Acoustics, among other initiatives.

On a recent sunny afternoon, I met Kim in MYKD's downtown Boston headquarters, where around 35 associates work in a historic brick building on a street crowded with foot traffic. As we talked, she advanced through a slideshow of her firm's recent projects, but she stopped on a slide devoted to the work of the late Estonian American

neuroscientist Jaak Panksepp, who has become something of a guiding light for the practice. Best known for coining the term "affective neuroscience," Panksepp identified seven primary emotional systems that drive much of human (and other mammalian) behavior. Play is one of them, but the others are seeking, care, lust, fear, sadness, and anger. Numerous scientists have found that imbalances in these emotional systems are tied to depression and other clinical disorders.

The idea that parks and open space exist just for play, Kim contends, misses huge swaths of what neuroscience has to tell us about what humans

**ABOVE**  
Mikyoung Kim, FASLA, helms what she calls an "ethical practice," one that combines social responsibility, scientific research, and empathy.

**RIGHT AND BELOW**  
Whether a garden is outdoors or inside, the firm incorporates color, shape, and fluidity to encourage exploration and emotion.



10TH FLOOR WINTER GARDEN



WISHINGSTONE PARK

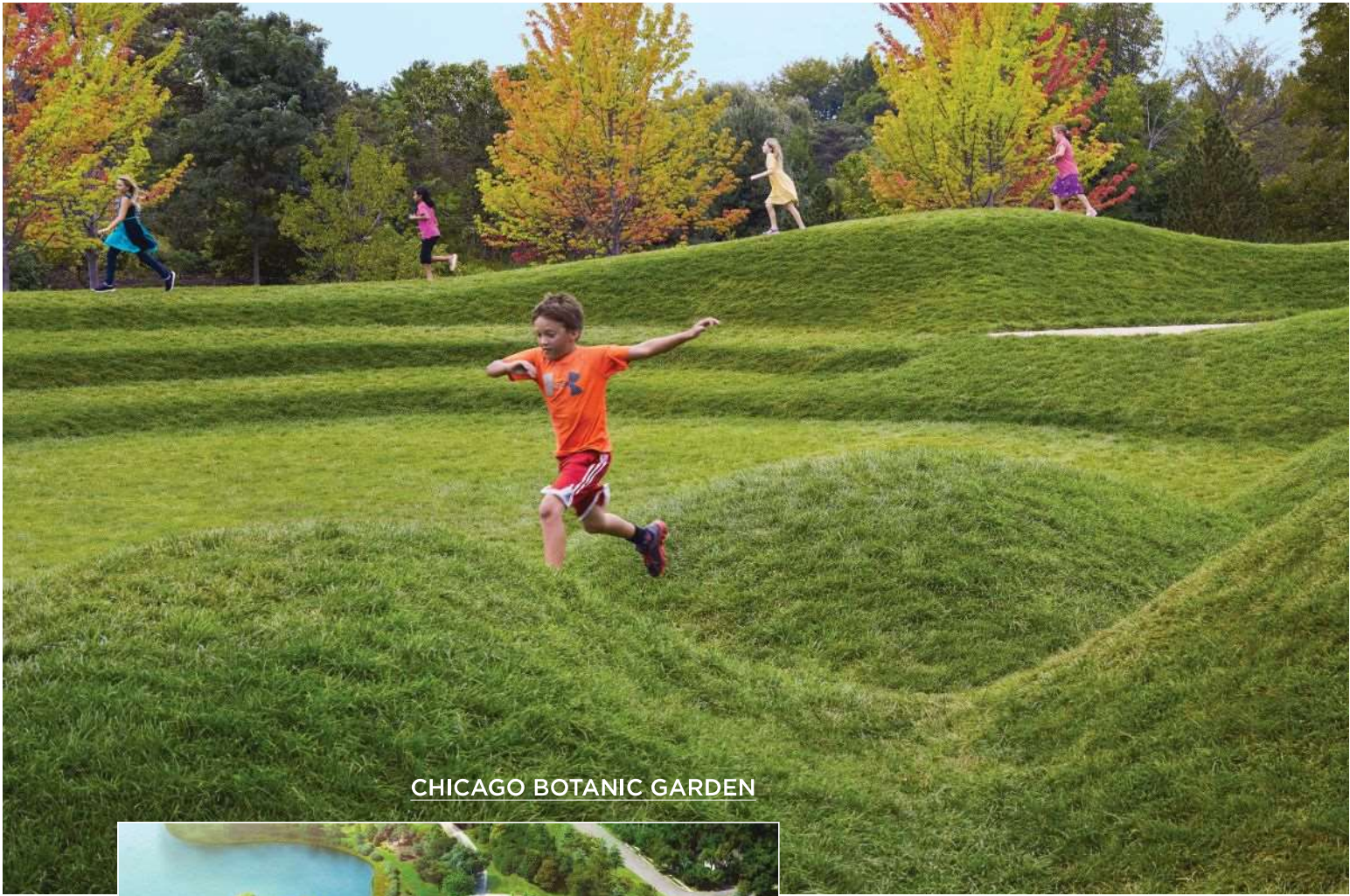


8TH FLOOR SCULPTURE GARDEN

derive from their environments. Kim and her team have developed tool kits for their designers with suggestions of the types of places that satisfy all these emotional systems. Places for seeking might include customizable spaces; places for grief might require active or interactive memorial spaces.

“A lot of our public parks are the result of a more standard process, you know, thinking about parks as places of entertainment,” Kim says. “We believe that you should play and have fun, but play is just one of the seven emotional systems that drive how we perceive space, how we perceive the world. We experienced this a lot over the last three years [with the pandemic], right? Seeking and grief and all these things. We’re trying to understand more deeply what the neurosciences are telling us today in order to understand how it can be translated into landscape architecture.”

Kim often refers to her studio as an ethical practice, meaning she has intentionally sought to



**CHICAGO BOTANIC GARDEN**



considered and built upon today,” she says. “But that was a very different America, where inclusion wasn’t really considered part of the process. [These parks] were really designed for a certain demographic [and] very narrow standard of deviation. As a society in the United States, we are at this crossroads, and I think COVID has punctured that [approach] like a bubble, which is to say maybe we should start to think about that standard of deviation being wider.”

**ABOVE AND INSET**  
The design for the Chicago Botanic Garden includes both upland mound areas for free play and lowland areas that connect to the adjacent lake.

do research and build public spaces that restore and strengthen communities. When Kim talks about diversity as a goal for her practice, she is talking about ethnic, gender, and socioeconomic diversity, but neurodiversity, too. To use a mathematical term, Kim is driven by a desire to widen the “sigma curve” of standard deviation in public spaces, to reach a broader swath of society.

“If we think of Olmsted and the work that he did, the foundations that he set up are still being

Later, as scullers rowed on the Charles River and cyclists crowded its shores, Kim and I toured several of the eight gardens and open spaces that MYKD has designed for Boston Children’s. The hospital complex is located only a couple blocks from the famous Back Bay Fens, and ↘



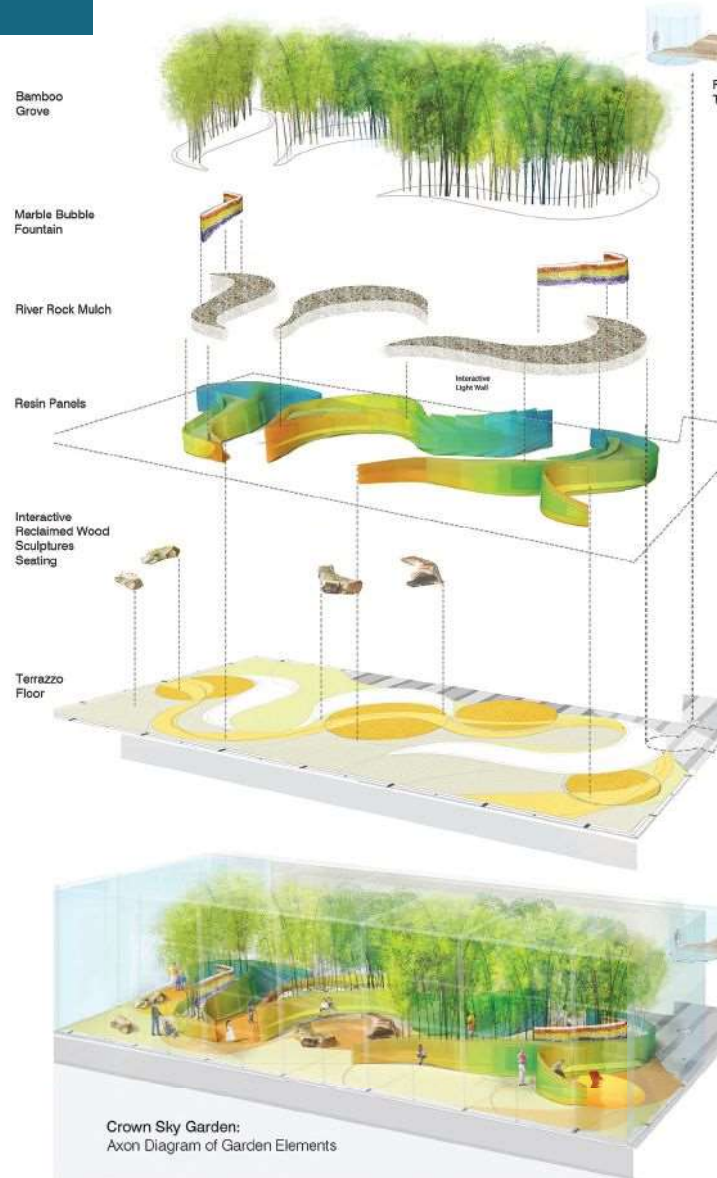
## PIVOTAL PROJECTS

### The Crown Sky Garden at Chicago Lurie Children's Hospital

BY RON HENDERSON, FASLA

**PLAY. MIKYOUNG KIM DESIGNS PLAY.** Her Hartford playground at the Moylan School was the first project of hers that I visited. It was a remarkable exercise in turning a line into a space that brought surprising experiences to the children whose playground it commanded. The playground was her master's thesis at the Harvard Graduate School of Design working with Professor Elizabeth Meyer, FASLA—and it was built. Kim's career has thrived by exploring such landscapes—places of experiential richness, spatial density, material layering, and kinesthetic energy; places of neurodiversity where play is ethically presented as an essential part of life. In her work, bumpy ground invites the body to explore, wiggly walls softly embrace spaces, and active illumination enlivens chromatic sensations.

The Crown Sky Garden, an early career-defining garden, is an aerial volume on the 11th story of the Lurie Children's Hospital in Chicago that sits at the intersection of public life in the hospital. Parents, children, staff, and both admitted and outpatients converge on this floor for the cafeteria, the gift shop, and the respite that is the sky garden. Play. Touch long, rustic, live-edge logs. See the color-shifting lights as they dim and brighten. Hear softened footsteps playing hide-and-seek among the flock of complex curvilinear walls that construct secrecy, privacy, and surprise. Swoops of colorful lines of terrazzo pavement flow through low walls that periodically diverge to accommodate living plants (the original tall bamboo has unfortunately been replaced with lower subtropical houseplants), and a constellation of log benches, tables and chairs, and platforms invite rest. Play as if our health and wellness require it. They do. ●





## Play



**solitary play**  
*teens, autism, anxiety*



**parallel play**  
*ASD, child development*

## Seeking

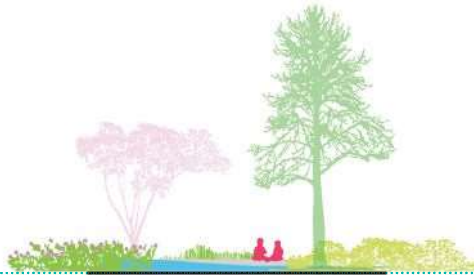


**musical elements for emotional expression**  
*nonverbal, ASD, youth*



**memory-evoking reused materials**  
*Alzheimer's/dementia, PTSD, caregivers*

## Care

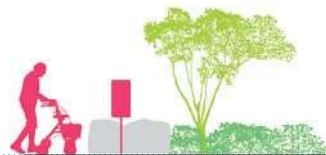


**multisensory experiences**  
*PTSD, ASD, ADHD, youth, seniors, anxiety, burnout*



**wilder, unstructured spaces**  
*youth, depression, burnout, teens*

## Fear



**clear wayfinding**  
*Alzheimer's/dementia, foreign language speakers, caregivers, seniors, youth, anxiety*



**accessible pathways**  
*Alzheimer's/dementia, seniors, youth, limited mobility, caregivers*

## Grief



**positive distractions**  
*PTSD, depression, burnout, caregivers, seniors, teens*



**horticultural workspaces**  
*PTSD, seniors, caregivers, communities, youth, teens, burnout*



**group play**  
*teens, seniors, caregivers, ASD*



**repetitive movements**  
*ASD, seniors*



**unsupervised play**  
*children, teens*



**customizable spaces**  
*ASD, youth, burnout*



**contemplative spaces**  
*seniors, youth, ASD, burnout, anxiety, teens, caregivers*



**opportunity for self-sufficiency**  
*youth, nonverbal, ASD, seniors, caregivers, teens*



**boundaries**  
*ASD, youth, seniors, teens, caregivers*



**noise modulation**  
*depression, PTSD, ASD, seniors, youth, caregivers, burnout, anxiety*



**varied intuitive streetscapes**  
*Alzheimer's/dementia, seniors, youth, foreign language speakers, caregivers*



**low-stimulation retreats**  
*seniors, youth, ASD, burnout, anxiety, teens, caregivers, PTSD*



**elements of consistency**  
*ASD, seniors, youth, anxiety*



**muted, calm colors**  
*seniors, youth, ASD, burnout, anxiety, teens, caregivers, PTSD*



**observation markers**  
*PTSD, seniors, youth, communities, caregivers*



**communal spaces**  
*PTSD, seniors, youth, communities, caregivers*



**active memorials**  
*PTSD, seniors, youth, communities, caregivers*

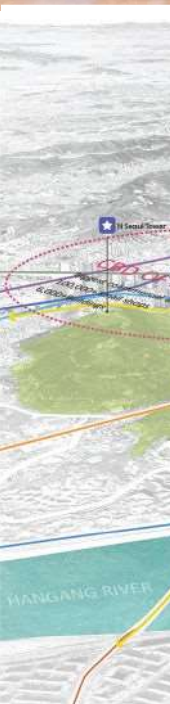


**ABOVE**  
Mikyong Kim Design's open and airy office in a historic building in downtown Boston.

↳ incorporating elements of the urban nature surrounding the buildings was important. Our first stop was an 8,000-square-foot rooftop garden on the hospital's 11th floor. With spectacular views of the Boston skyline, an inviting central grassy mound, an oval pedestrian pattern, and varied seating, the garden is a space for patients, caregivers, and family members. Even with so much visual stimulation, what is immediately striking about the garden is that it feels calm, with the Richard Scarry-esque sounds of a busy city largely muted. Kim pointed out that Boston Children's includes a teenage population as well, so the space is designed to be engaging for various age

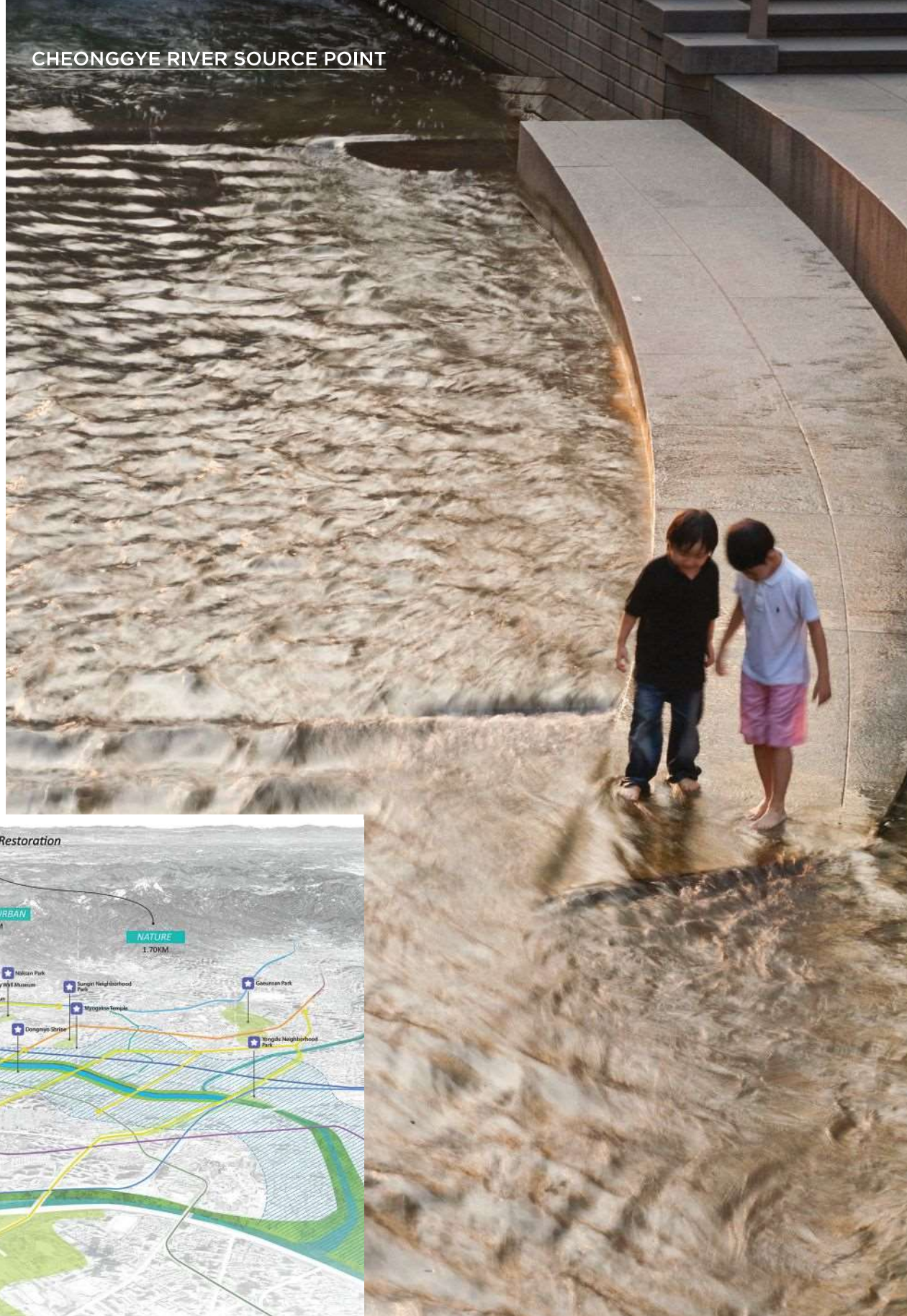
groups. For instance, young and old alike might delight in finding all the animal statuary hidden around the garden, which was salvaged from the former Prouty Garden, a healing garden designed by the Olmsted Brothers that was demolished in 2016 when the hospital underwent an earlier expansion.

Later, we visited another rooftop garden on the 12th floor that can be closed off for families of terminal patients. Kim has had a long, ongoing relationship with a constituency group for the hospital, one that includes staff and parents. In both large-format community talks and one-on-one



MAGGIE HALL PHOTOGRAPHY, TOP

## CHEONGGYE RIVER SOURCE POINT



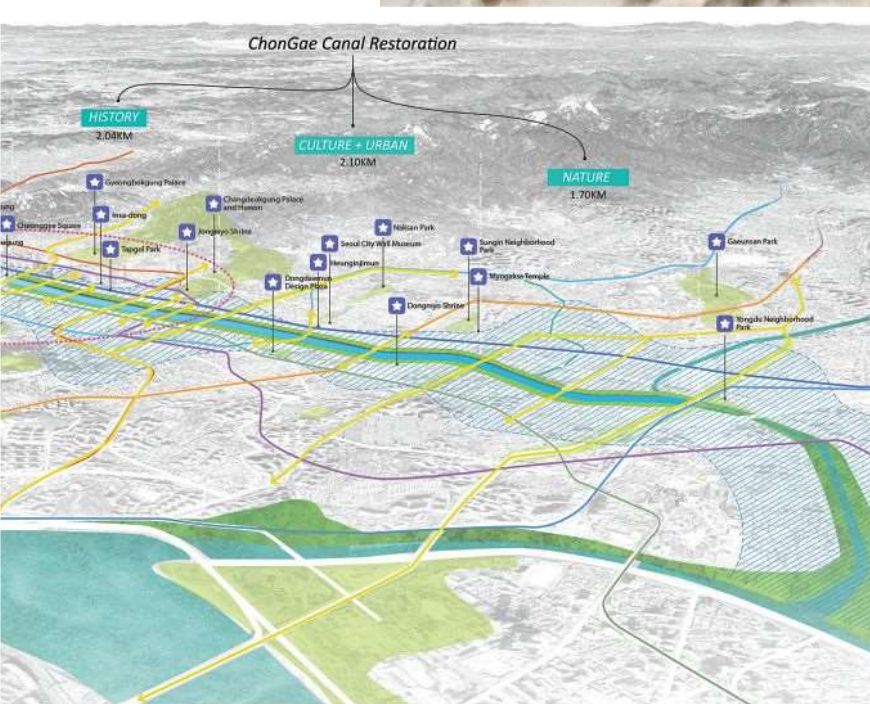
### RIGHT

The transformation of a former freeway in Seoul, South Korea, brings people away from the urban bustle to a restored waterway.

### BELOW

The canal restoration features a series of urban zones—historical, cultural, and natural.

ROBERT SUCH, RIGHT: MIKYOUNG KIM DESIGN, BOTTOM





## PIVOTAL PROJECTS

### Michigan Central Station

BY STEPHANIE ONWENU, ASLA

**B**ACK IN SEPTEMBER OF 2020, I looped the main roadway (Vernor Highway) that bisected Roosevelt Park while on the Michigan ASLA Chapter Landscape Architecture Ride bike tour, an annual event that provides an “education in motion” outdoor social activity for the Michigan landscape architecture community. Michigan Central Station was one of the bike tour’s notable project sites, with Roosevelt Park as the green space front door to the building.

Roosevelt Park currently exists between two neighborhoods located in southwest Detroit—Corktown and Mexicantown. Considered a bridge between the Mexican and Irish cultures, it was originally designed as a passive park space for rail passengers who rode and got off at the Detroit stop at the iconic Michigan Central Station—a historic landmark building and “gateway to the Motor City.” Many families immigrated to Detroit through the Michigan Central Station in the hope of a better life.

Over the years, Michigan Central Station has endured investments and renovations that brought awareness to the park as a space that preserves

the origins of the area.

A new master plan by Mikyoung Kim Design will transform the station into a 30-acre sustainable, mixed-use mobility hub that connects with the surrounding neighborhoods.

The redevelopment will be a multipurpose park space that transforms the four-lane boulevard into a pedestrian promenade linking the building to the park’s entrance at the intersections of Michigan Avenue and 16th Street. A walking loop with swinging benches and a central flexible lawn space will be great for outdoors activities, festivals, and events. Stormwater infrastructure is an important part of the landscape design of the project, with rain and pollinator gardens accompanying the pedestrian circulation network. Preserved and newly added trees with native plant beds will provide a beautiful and clear view inside and outside the park space.

Detroit is a city rich in history, innovation, and resilience. Roosevelt Park can serve as a centerpiece park and destination space in the neighborhood, bringing together various communities into a multipurpose space accessible for all ages. Newlab, one



of the new organizations at Michigan Central, now hosts Black Tech Saturdays—a community initiative that offers workshops and training to local people of color, building a culture of innovation to support the growth of Black technology businesses in Detroit and redefining the way we work, play, teach, and learn from each other.

This project is a thread that links the history of the area and its surrounding neighborhoods and offers a beautified space that amplifies the importance of making connections in our community. The unified park has the potential to serve as a main focal point and gateway for the past, present, and future residents and the greater community. I am so looking forward to visiting this spring to see what blooms, and the space in activation. ●

## THE PRYDE



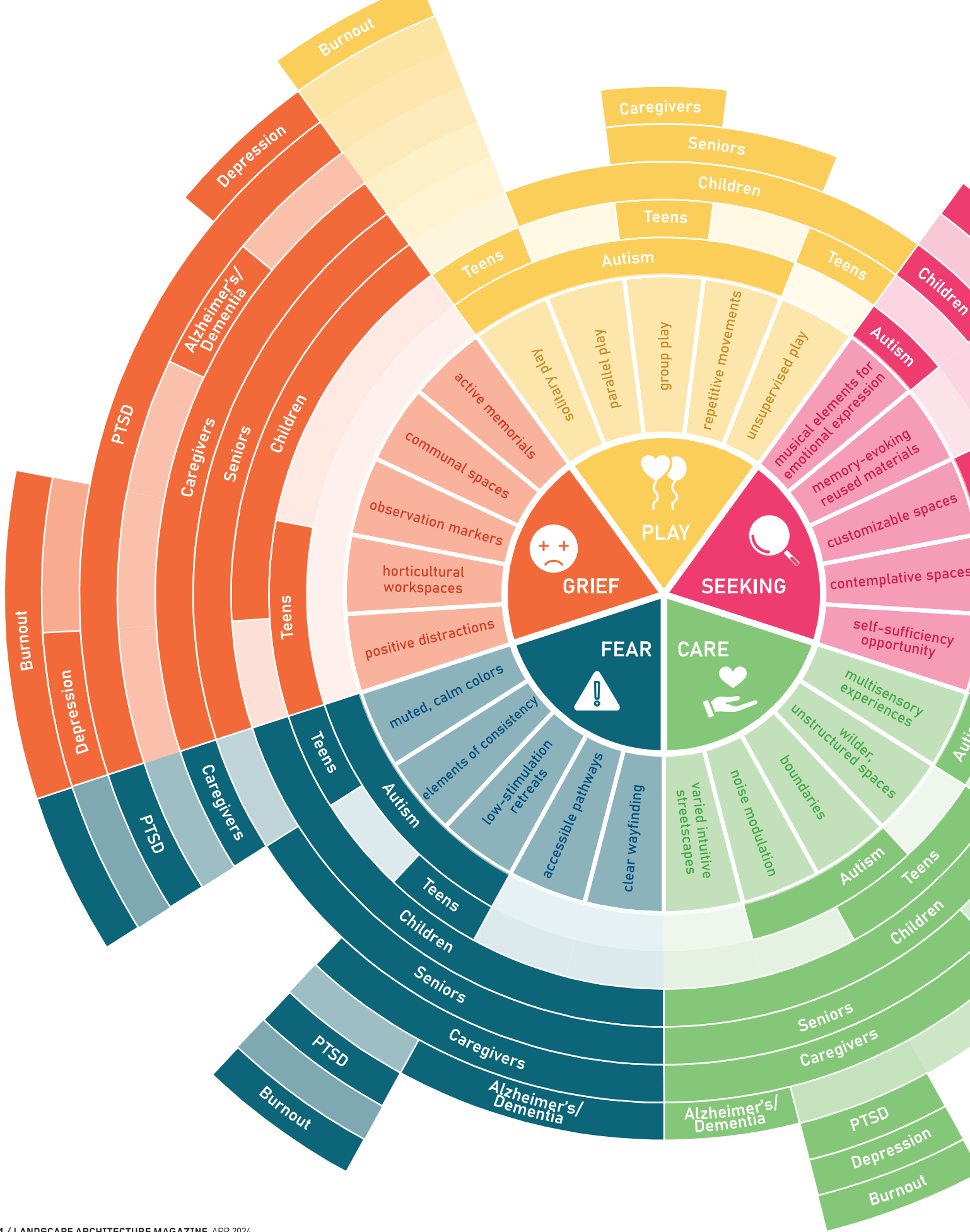
**LEFT** Research into the history and needs of the LGBTQIA+ and senior living communities informed the naturalistic landscape of the Pryde, the first development of its kind in New England.

conversations, sometimes at a child's bedside, Kim learned that it was especially important for terminal patients and their families to have an area that could be enclosed but was still open to the sky. Silence and serenity are essential, so this space is marked by its lush, soft planting palette. After we chatted in this space, however, Kim noticed that street noise was still too intrusive; she has since engaged Threshold Acoustics to determine how to make the site even quieter.

Such conversations also informed the design of the hospital's new ground-level Wishingstone Garden, a peaceful open space with undulating landforms and seating, and translucent blue house structures (which cleverly cover utility shafts). During our visit, a toddler was ambling up and down—falling over, getting back up again, reaching for his mother's hand. Seeking, as we humans are prone to do.

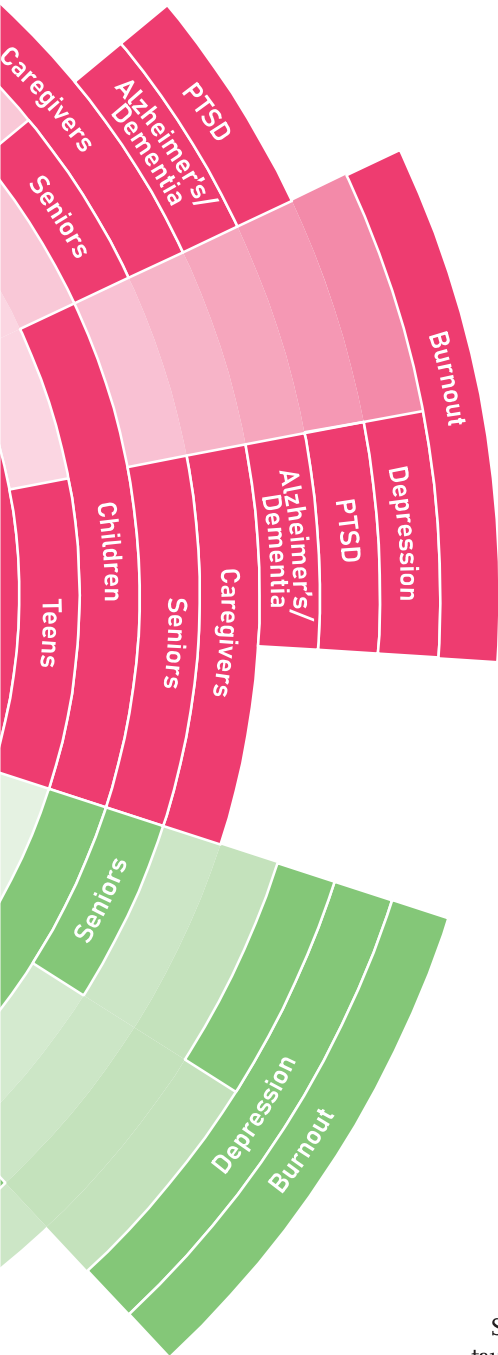
As we watched, Kim's thoughts turned to the Crown Sky Garden at Chicago Lurie Children's Hospital [see sidebar]. After the garden opened, Kim received a letter from a mother whose son had been admitted with a life-threatening illness, and she had just given birth to another child six months earlier: "She told us she would go into our garden to breastfeed and look at the sky."

Kim's capacity for empathy stems in part from being the child of Korean immigrants. She became accustomed to spaces where she was the only person of color and where no one bothered to learn her name. "My parents had a very strong ethical kind of stance," Kim says. "So, they gave me a Korean name, and I remember that one of my teachers tried to change my name to Maryanne, and my father went to talk to them. He was so mad. And that taught me that it's okay to be different." Only in the past six years or so, Kim



**OPPOSITE**

This neurodiversity design graphic illustrates audience engagement with designed spaces and which emotional systems can be triggered and healed by design.



says, has she walked into meetings where everyone had learned to say her name before she arrived.

After training as a concert pianist at Oberlin College and Conservatory, Kim studied landscape architecture at the Harvard Graduate School of Design and public art at MIT. As a young graduate, she landed a teaching position at the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD), where she taught for 18 years, even as she simultaneously began her own practice. It was at RISD that she became very interested in collaboration—both among students and with clients and communities. Her first project was

a park in Hartford, Connecticut, her hometown. “There it was really about trying to understand what play means in these underserved neighborhoods. Like, how do we start to create places for them to release and to engage?” she says. “I didn’t know at the time that I was interested in how you go into a neighborhood and start to create a place for them that’s different than any other.”

Kim admits that it took some time for the firm to figure out what was going to be foundational in building an ethical practice that balances sustainability with individuality and community—she looks at the systems that make up the human body as not wholly dissimilar to the larger systems that fuel a city. “It took about 10 years when we started working in health care, where we worked with different hospitals and their researchers to understand that our work is really about something deeper, about the responsive





## PIVOTAL PROJECTS

### 888 Boylston Plaza

BY GARY HILDERBRAND, FASLA

**HAVE YOU SEEN** those whirly rotors on top of shiny poles on a plaza in Boston on Boylston Street, with vivid, fluid colors? Do you know that they tell you how windy it is when you are blown around like a dervish in winter?

Designers who work on any public realm project in Boston are required to test the project for street-level wind impacts. This requirement is now routine: Your design team works with RWDI, a brilliant Canadian performance engineering firm that has perfected a model that tests any Boston building proposal for wind impacts to determine whether—and to what degree—the project's wind effects meet or exceed parameters for human comfort. Those of us who have gotten little red icons on our plans from RWDI know the challenge of refining measures for human comfort. It usually means adding deflecting canopies on buildings, greater coarseness to facade surfaces, occasionally vertical structures to deflect wind, and typically additional trees in specific locations.

The Mikyoung Kim Design team took this mandate to a new level on its project for a plaza at 888 Boylston Street in Boston's busy Back Bay



retail district. Rather than the typical mitigation response, the team directly mapped the wind forces, clustering trees and wind instruments together to moderate heightened wind gusts and explicitly register the phenomenon.

On my most recent visit, on a windless, overcast day, just a few of the vanes at the top whirred slowly or sat still, and the poles stood quietly, exhibiting their shiny stainless steel.

On a windy day, it is another thing altogether. The tops spin variably, and the columns exhibit bright green to purple colors, indexing the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration code for wind speed. So you can tell, if you know that code, just what kind of wind speed is affecting your body. The curiously shaped granite planters they stand in are another reflection of the map of the wind effects. The stone is routed in ways that make me think of the cut lines car designers talk about—beautifully carved arris lines suggesting sculpting by the wind.

Artists and writers have advocated for some time that a work can register phenomena like wind. Elizabeth Meyer, FASLA, our astute critic in all things, argues in her acclaimed essay on the role of aesthetics in sustainability that “...what is needed are designed landscapes that provoke those who experience them to become more aware of how their actions affect the environment and to care enough to make changes. This involves considering the role of aesthetic environmental experiences, such as beauty, in re-centering human consciousness from an egocentric to a more biocentric perspective.”

Will this work? First, will the observant passerby on Boylston Street realize, on a gusty day, that the wind is registering mechanically on lighted poles, and second, will they feel motivated to change their everyday existence? Will they be moved beyond a fascination with lights and propellers on behalf of the planet and its impending crisis? I, for one, hope so. ●



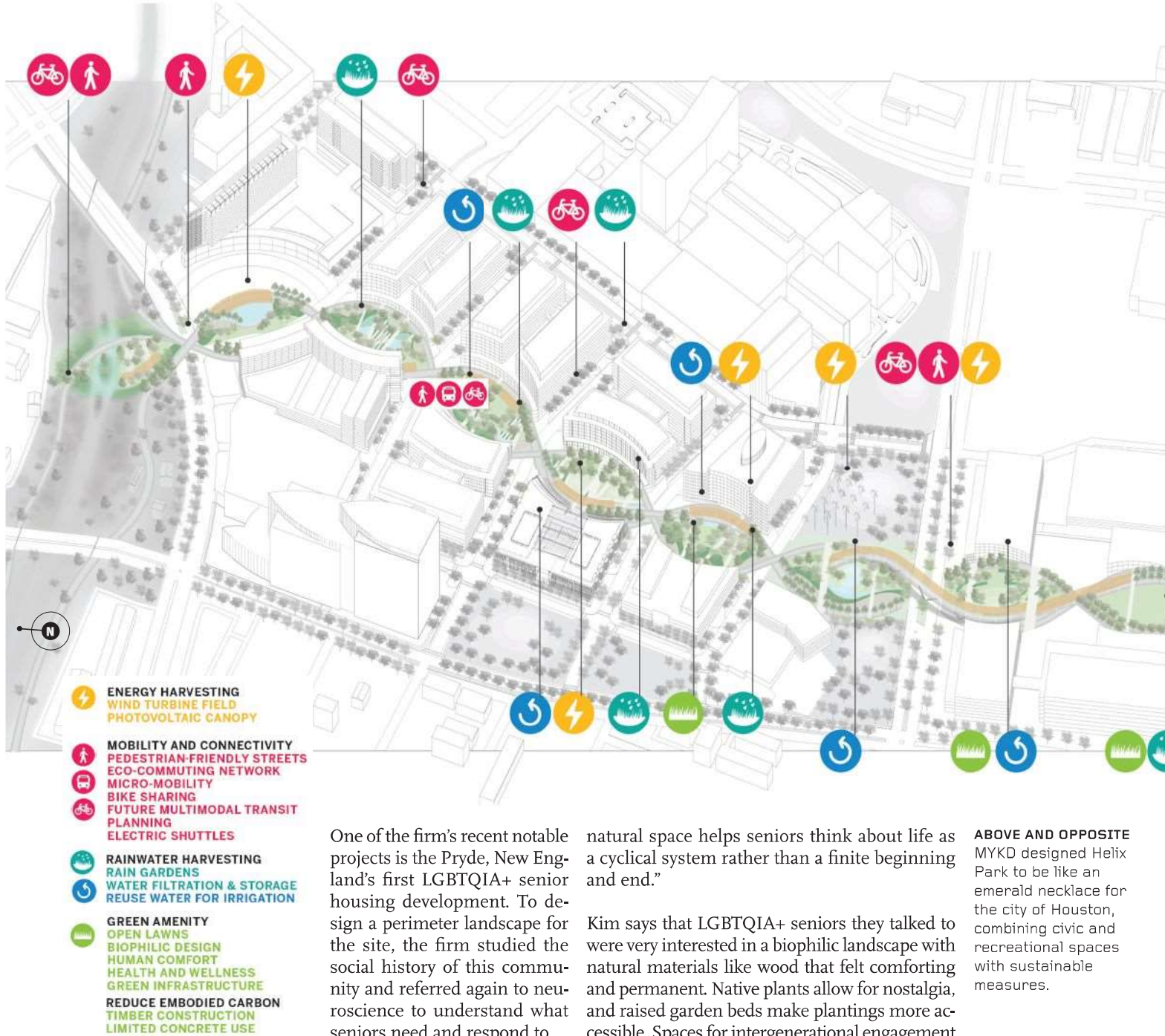
technology of the body,” she says. “It always goes to the brain—the kind of emotional response of the brain to the work that we do. The bigger question is how we can rethink the design of public and civic space considering not only the individual brain, but the emotional brain of the city. Because the city has an emotion to it as well.”

These considerations have led the firm to both smaller- and larger-scale work. For Houston’s Texas Medical Center Helix Park, MYKD conceived a 21st-century “emerald necklace,” a helix-inspired chain of open spaces. The park will provide urban

parkland in one of the nation’s most diverse cities while dealing with rainwater and runoff in a 200-year floodplain. As a resilience measure, the site will be raised by as much as five feet, with the planting of about 650 new trees, to create what Kim calls “an organic sponge” that stores, filters, and repurposes an estimated 2.3 million gallons of stormwater. In addition to these big-picture moves, the firm also considered human comfort in every corner of the campus, creating a variety of spaces for respite and relief that included interactive water features and abundant shade structures.

**ABOVE**  
Kim talks with Senior Associate Jess Hamilton, ASLA, at the Boston office.

## TEXAS MEDICAL CENTER HELIX PARK



One of the firm's recent notable projects is the Pryde, New England's first LGBTQIA+ senior housing development. To design a perimeter landscape for the site, the firm studied the social history of this community and referred again to neuroscience to understand what seniors need and respond to.

"With all age groups, having opportunities for social interaction is one of the greatest things that we can provide as spacemakers," says Jess Hamilton, ASLA, a senior associate who leads MYKD's research efforts. "But there's a lot of research that we've been digging into, about how being able to see the cyclical nature of a more

natural space helps seniors think about life as a cyclical system rather than a finite beginning and end."

Kim says that LGBTQIA+ seniors they talked to were very interested in a biophilic landscape with natural materials like wood that felt comforting and permanent. Native plants allow for nostalgia, and raised garden beds make plantings more accessible. Spaces for intergenerational engagement that appeal to young and old alike are key, too. For LGBTQIA+ seniors, a community that has been fighting for civil rights their whole lives, the fight continues, so to speak, into retirement.

"They were part of the Stonewall riot generation, and now they're trying to find their community in retirement, and it wasn't available in the senior

**ABOVE AND OPPOSITE** MYKD designed Helix Park to be like an emerald necklace for the city of Houston, combining civic and recreational spaces with sustainable measures.





## MIKYOUNG KIM'S RECOMMENDED READINGS

“The Effect of Noise Exposure on Cognitive Performance and Brain Activity Patterns,” by Mohammad Javad Jafari, Reza Khosrowabadi, Soheila Khodakarim, and Farough Mohammadian; *Open Access Macedonian Journal of Medical Sciences*, September 2019.

*How Emotions Are Made: The Secret Life of the Brain*, by Lisa Feldman Barrett; Boston: Mariner Books, 2017.

“Is Noise Pollution the Next Big Public-Health Crisis?” by David Owen; *The New Yorker*, May 13, 2019.

*Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder*, by Richard Louv; Chapel Hill, North Carolina: Algonquin Books, 2005.

*Restorative Cities: Urban Design for Mental Health and Wellbeing*, by Jenny Roe and Layla McCay; London: Bloomsbury, 2021.

*The Well-Gardened Mind: The Restorative Power of Nature*, by Sue Stuart-Smith; New York: Scribner, 2020.

*Your Brain on Art: How the Arts Transform Us*, by Susan Magsamen and Ivy Ross; New York: Penguin Random House, 2023.



market,” says Bryan Chou, ASLA, an associate principal at MYKD. “Now there’s this new generation [of LGBTQIA+ youth] that has to kind of reopen that civil rights conversation again. That’s not a resolved conversation. I think the community is still trying to grapple with a lot of these issues and really understand it. It’s an interesting accumulation of different cultural influences in this one project.”

Play was also an essential factor with the Pryde, Hamilton says, particularly in the design of a dance deck. “At one point we had a lot of sub-



**ABOVE**  
Heejung Shin and  
Alek De Mott, project  
designers at the firm,  
talk through a model.

dued tones and, you know, it was looking very elegant and lovely,” she says. “Our community partner Aileen [Montour, president of LGBTQ Senior Housing, Inc.] said, ‘You know, these are seniors, but not everybody wants these subdued tones. These are lively people.’ We’ve got a deck that was envisioned as a dance deck where people could have socials and have fun together. Play: At all levels, it’s just so critical.”

It’s no longer enough, Kim contends, to create superficial pockets of green in cities being ravaged by climate change, by health crises, and

by disconnection. “We know that there’s a lot of psychological research out there that says within three to five minutes of engaging with the natural world, our brain function, the electrical function in our brain, our blood pressure, it all normalizes so quickly,” she says. “I want to go the next step, which is, how as a society do we strengthen each other through our urban spaces? Maybe public parks aren’t places for just entertainment. They are places where we get stronger.” ●

KIM O’CONNELL WRITES ABOUT LANDSCAPE, SCIENCE, AND HISTORY FROM ARLINGTON, VIRGINIA.