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# The Sidewalk Shed, a Ubiquitous New York Eyesore, Gets a Makeover

The Appraisal

By MATT A.V. CHABAN    AUG. 24, 2015

Zaha Hadid has designed some of the most remarkable buildings of this generation. Whether a striking factory for BMW, daring Olympic venues or museums in Rome, Glasgow and Cincinnati, the work of the Iraqi-born, London-based Ms. Hadid has brought her global renown and a Pritzker Prize, considered architecture's Nobel Prize.

Now she has tackled one of New York's most intractable building problems: the ubiquitous and unloved sidewalk shed.

Construction is underway on Ms. Hadid's first project in New York, 520 West 28th Street, and with it comes the inevitable shed, as emblematic of the city's landscape as the Empire State Building — though the only souvenirs they produce are mysterious stains and ripped clothing.

The city is entombed in nearly 200 miles of metal bars and plywood decking that protects pedestrians from falling debris and construction material — a claustrophobic labyrinth that could cover the sidewalks on both sides of Broadway

several times over. Even the High Line has them, in six spots, including Ms. Hadid's project.

Given the location, the developer of the 39-unit condominium project, the Related Companies, sought to do something different here, and asked Ms. Hadid to create a special wrap to help hide the shed.

"Zaha is an artist as much as an architect, so we thought it would be interesting to see what she could do with our shed, too," Greg Gushee, a Related executive vice president, said.

Equal parts civic gesture and promotional material, the shed is made of a taut swoop of diaphanous white and silver Serge Ferrari fabric. It resembles an oversize light reflector like those seen on the movie and photo shoots that also block sidewalks across the city.

"I think it quite looks like a spaceship," Karen Reinhard said admiringly last Thursday, out for a stroll on the High Line with her family while on vacation from Manchester, England. "It enfolds you, and sort of creates a view and blocks the view at the same time."

Exactly as Ms. Hadid intended it.

"The fabric is distorted, it blends and stretches and creates its own world while giving an interesting play of orthogonal versus amorphous structure," she said in an email. "It creates a fluid four-dimensional world whilst the translucent fabric allows views to the city beyond."

Installed two weeks ago, her shed will come down when the project is finished in a few years. But this summer has also brought hope for a more permanent solution to this nuisance overhead.

The New York Building Congress, an advocacy group for some of the city's top contractors, engineers, architects and landlords, this summer held a design competition for a better sidewalk shed. The idea was to create something aesthetically pleasing with improved retail visibility and sidewalk mobility — no more webs of crossbeams, for example — without sacrificing safety.

“These sheds are so pervasive, so many of them stay up for so long, and they’re horrible, by and large,” Richard T. Anderson, president of the Building Congress, said. “If we, as an industry, can do something to make them even a little bit better, it could have a huge benefit throughout the city.”

Submissions were due last week, and more than 30 firms responded. Winners will be announced on Sept. 25, and the Building Congress plans to create prototypes that will be installed on some of its members’ buildings.

But many developers said that little will change unless the city, through mandates or incentives, gets involved. Most building owners do not have the budget for a well-designed shed, and given that the run-of-the-mill version does its job well, city officials have not considered shed beautification a priority.

“Street sheds are obnoxious, albeit necessary, features of New York’s sidewalks,” Douglas Durst, a third-generation developer and a sponsor of the Building Congress competition, said in an email. “A safe and economically viable alternative that will improve pedestrian flow and won’t be dark, dank and drippy is desperately needed.”

Sheds are something even his grandfather would have dealt with. City scaffolding laws date back at least 120 years, according to Christopher Gray, founder of the Office for Metropolitan History and The New York Times’s former Streetscapes columnist. The first of many mentions of sidewalk sheds in the newspaper appeared on the front page in 1899, and, like the umpire who gets attention only when he blows a call, the shed did not come out looking good.

“Girl Crushed to Death,” declared the headline over an article about an 18-year-old woman killed by a collapsing shed piled with tons of bricks and plaster in Manhattan.

City Hall did try to develop a better shed in 2009, through a competition co-sponsored by the American Institute of Architects. The winning entry, Urban Umbrella, was celebrated around the world, but ultimately the system proved too expensive to fabricate and deploy widely. A small pilot was installed at 100 Broadway, near Wall Street, in 2011, but that was it.

Frank Sciame, a top construction manager in the city who is leading the Building Congress competition, is particularly fond of construction canopies that cantilever off buildings. He has deployed them since the 1990s for landlords who want to eliminate any sidewalk obstructions, though they, too, tend to be more complicated and expensive.

He and others acknowledge it would be unreasonable to expect every landlord to adopt new sidewalk sheds tomorrow, but perhaps they could be phased in, or targeted, he said.

“Maybe if your scaffolding will be up for more than three months or your building is over 30 feet wide, or you’re in Midtown versus the outer boroughs,” Mr. Sciame said.

Arguably, more attractive sheds are most important during real estate downturns, not boom times, when stalled sites, and their scaffolding, can languish for years. “These sites can become real blights on the city,” said MaryAnne Gilmartin, chief executive of Forest City Ratner.

Without endorsing the Building Congress’s competition explicitly, Rick Chandler, the city’s buildings commissioner, has expressed enthusiasm for it.

In a statement, he said, “The department looks forward to reviewing the plans of the winning applicant for code compliance, which may allow developers to incorporate a unique and more aesthetically appealing safeguarding structure into their projects.”

And who knows: Build a nice-enough shed, and people might be sorry to see them go.

“It wouldn’t be so bad if they kept this one,” Martin Goodman, a Bronx-born California transplant, said while sitting on a bench beside Ms. Hadid’s High Line shed. “It’s quite pretty, and I like the shade.”

***Correction: August 24, 2015***

*An earlier version of this article described incorrectly Frank Sciame’s job. He is a construction manager, not a structural engineer.*

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