

Champion of Cities

With New York's High Line park expansion, Amanda Burden's urban revitalization efforts set a model for the world

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Photograph by Sean Donnola

URBAN PRINCESS | Amanda Burden in her office near New York's City Hall, surrounded by renderings of her projects.

On a rainy Monday night in May, in the midst of the New York benefit calendar's high season, a steady stream of polished invitees arrive for a tented dinner hosted by fashion house Calvin Klein marking the expansion of the High Line park. The guest list has been pulled from the worlds of business, art and fashion for what has become the pet cause of many of the city's most powerful philanthropists. Among the heavy hitters is Amanda Burden, the daughter of famed socialite Babe Paley and no stranger to events such as these, but now, as director of city planning, Burden is here to toast a public space that she was instrumental in bringing to fruition.

This elegant blonde with a mellifluous voice is steelier than one might expect, a useful trait for someone who is spearheading Mayor Michael Bloomberg's far-reaching effort to rezone nearly a quarter of New York City and reclaim the city's waterfront. Her populist achievements span all five boroughs and include

zoning for new affordable housing in East Harlem, Brooklyn and the South Bronx, as well as the massively popular High Line, an abandoned railroad track that has been transformed into a popular tourist destination in the once-gritty meatpacking neighborhood, which has seen commerce move in and property values soar in the past decade.



Keith Sherwood/Getty Images

VIEWS FROM THE EDGE |

Lower Manhattan, where Burden planned the Battery Park City neighborhood.

Chairing the City Planning Commission since 2002, Burden, age 67, has revolutionized its role in the city, transforming a once-sleepy bureaucratic agency into an activist department championing good design by using zoning as a weapon to enforce her vision. In her second-floor office near New York's City Hall, she reviews applications for all new buildings that come before the commission, instructing developers and architects on what they can and cannot do—something that comes as a dramatic shift in the order of business to executives accustomed to getting their way. Putting special emphasis on "how the building meets the sky" (suggesting attractive cornices or sculpted tops) and pedestrians' line of sight (engaging building materials at street level), Burden makes it her job to ensure developers have done their homework. Her oversight even extends to landscaping, where she can quibble over the placement and sustainability of plants and trees being proposed.

Bloomberg, a staunch ally who appointed Burden to the job, cheerfully admits that developers complain to him about her micromanaging style, mimicking their words, " 'Why doesn't she leave me alone? I'm just trying to make some money.' I feel their pain, but I have confidence in her." He approves of her diplomatic yet feisty style, saying, "She cares about the details that make things work. She fights for it. She's not in your face, but she's really strong." Burden has made her most lasting mark on the city by presiding over an ambitious block-by-block rezoning of large swaths of the city's five boroughs, the first large-scale effort to impose a coherent vision of New York since 1961. From Coney Island to the Manhattan waterfront, she has established new guidelines for growth and encouraged revitalization of once-forlorn neighborhoods.



**Courtesy of Department of Planning/rendering courtesy of Shop Architects
A rendering of Burden's proposed waterfront walkway for the redesigned East River Waterfront Esplanade and Piers Project.**

In the universe of urban design, it can be difficult to keep score of who has influenced whom. Burden frequently travels the country and the globe, constantly taking photographs, and she reaches for her scrapbooks to show off the places that have served as inspiration. Tivoli Gardens, the popular Danish amusement park, shaped her thinking for the newly rezoned Coney Island; in Paris, the refurbished elevated rail Promenade Plantée served as a model for the High Line. Yet as eager as she is to credit others, Burden's own innovations also serve as a template for city planners world-wide.

"People around the globe have noticed. Amanda's counterparts in Singapore and Hong Kong, where there has been explosive growth in the past 10 years, are looking at New York. . . . They look to us to understand what we have done with waterfront planning, creating unique public spaces like the High Line," says Vishaan Chakrabarti, professor of real-estate development at Columbia University and a former Burden staffer. "New York is not alone, and Amanda is not alone, but she is a leader of a movement that says we can have a lot of economic growth in cities but also couple that with liveability and neighborhood preservation." Marvin Malecha, a member of the American Architectural Foundation's board and dean of the College of Design at North Carolina State University, says, "As the rest of the country is trying to figure out how to get their cities to be more dense—to get more people to live downtown, to be more multi-use—her work seems to be really sensitive to that. She finds ways to do it."

For those who are aware of Burden's storied heritage and career trajectory, there's amazement at how solidly she has landed. "She went from being one of the most high-profile party girls to one of the most powerful people in the city," says Mitchell Moss, a professor of urban policy and planning at New York University. "Bloomberg gave her the power, but they took old industrial property that had been abandoned and underused and brought it into the 21st century." Yet for much of her career, Burden was often dismissively referred to in the press as a socialite, much to her frustration. "It haunted me," she says. "It was so interesting when it stopped being attached to my name." When did it stop? "With this job."



Ben Martin/Time Life Pictures/Getty Images
Burden with mother Babe Paley and stepfather William Paley at her 1964 wedding to Carter Burden.

Her parents, Babe Paley (née Barbara Cushing) and Standard Oil heir Stanley Mortimer, divorced when she was a toddler and her mother married the formidable CBS founder William Paley. Burden grew up in a cocoon of private schools, servants and such famous family friends as Truman Capote, and was only a young socialite when she replaced Jackie Kennedy on the top of the Best Dressed List. At 20, she dropped out of Wellesley to marry law student Carter Burden, a descendent of Cornelius Vanderbilt. A 1966 *New York Times* article, "And Amanda Is Her Name," quoted designers like Halston vying to dress "the most beautiful girl going" and gushed that the couple were "idolized, rhapsodized, fantasized" over.

Yet even in that heady environment, Burden says she was drawn to meaningful work. "I knew when I was growing up that I was going to do public service," she recalls. "My mother was an enormous admirer of the Roosevelts and maybe that fit into my psyche about how much they changed America." She was fascinated by her stepfather's involvement with urban design when he built the iconic CBS building Black Rock and an adjacent pedestrian park. "He wanted it to be the best building in the whole city and spent an enormous amount of time ensuring it was perfect," she recalls. The tiny Paley Park, which includes appealing landscaping along with a waterfall to drown out city noise, demonstrated to her "how you can actually change a city by a small stroke." This set in motion an appreciation of designing for the enjoyment of the entire population of a city.

Burden learned early how to straddle two spheres, her social prowess complementing her ideologies, something that has aided her tremendously in her work. As a young woman, she was a teaching aide at a Harlem public school while her husband went to work for Bobby Kennedy. She reminisces, "The people we met then, it was artistic, intellectual, public service—it was one of the great times in New York, the late 1960s." As Bloomberg puts it, "Amanda and her husband were the 'it' couple in those days."

Two children and a 1972 divorce later, Burden returned to college, and upon graduation, went to work as a research analyst for William "Holly" Whyte, the renowned urbanologist who examined city behavior, observing things such as the way in which people move from a park bench when the sun shifts or avoid too many steps in a plaza (five is ideal, six is too high). "Holly walked me through the streets," she recalls. "He told me that you can measure the health of a city by the vitality of its streets and public spaces." She credits Whyte with inspiring many of the ideas that she has since incorporated into her city-planning regulations.

Burden subsequently built a public-sector resume that included working for the Urban Development Corporation, supervising all of their New York State public spaces and spearheading the planning and design for the new Manhattan neighborhood Battery Park City, which was built on a landfill. Ask what it was like for her to work in a primarily male-dominated world in that era, and she replies, "I knew I had an eye, I was good at this. I had no difficulty being with difficult, demanding men. I used everything in my power—my brain, my looks, my powers of persuasion. I knew that I was very ambitious and that I would deliver."

Always perceived as wealthy, Burden says, "My financial status was up and down for a long period of time until my stepfather died. I really had to work." (William Paley died in 1990; Burden listed assets of at least \$13.4 million in a 2010 annual ethics form.)

A member of the New York City Planning Commission since 1990, Burden moved quickly upon taking over as director, making street life lively by legalizing sidewalk cafes and ensuring that plazas built by private developers, in a trade-off for height variances, were actually attractive to humans. "They need to be inviting and well-used," Burden says. "If there's just a tree canopy, during the months of the year where there are no leaves, it's bleak. You need bushes or ground cover to give it some softness."



Horst /Vogue /Condé Nast Archive © Condé Nast The Burdens at home in 1965.

One of her most visible successes has been helping to preserve the High Line. Two neighborhood activists, Robert Hammond and Joshua David, conceived the idea and approached Burden, who changed the zoning to allow 38 property owners to sell the part of their land that was under the railbed, something that hadn't been permitted previously. She has been intimately involved in the aesthetics of the park, weighing in on such seemingly minor details as the type of wood planks and the angle of the chaises longues. "Amanda spent a lot of time helping us design the benches, how wide they should be, whether they should have backs," recalls Hammond, co-director of Friends of the High Line. "She asks questions on the planting, 'Why did we pick these plants? When are they going to start blooming?'"

Within the real-estate world there are certainly some who resist lauding Burden's work. Her policies represent a marked change from how many are used to doing business and they don't always agree with her priorities for the city. "I work for developers; they tend to be people with large egos and huge risk takers. Anything in their mind that is standing between them and the final payoff of their bet is going to make them very cranky," says real-estate attorney Jesse Masyr. He notes that Burden places more emphasis on design and requires much more time-consuming detail than her predecessors in granting developers a "plaza bonus," a term that refers to the city allowing developers to add extra floors if their buildings include a pedestrian plaza. "I personally think, although my clients may want to fire me for saying this, that we've got better plazas because of it."



Shen Hong/Corbis The High Line

Burden admits that she obsesses over the small stuff. Pulling out blueprints in her office, she points out emblematic tweaks that she has made in the design for a new waterfront esplanade near the South Street Seaport: "See this concrete seat? You sit on the edge, that's going to get you in the back of the knee. It needs to be eased."

As for her boss, the mayor, he admires her knack for finessing tough audiences. "She goes to a town meeting in a place that you and I have never heard of, she meets with 200 people who are what makes America America—working people—and she builds a dialogue," he says. "Her Chanel suit may cost more than any other piece of clothing in that room, but they empathize with her, they like her, they trust her. **That is her great talent.**"