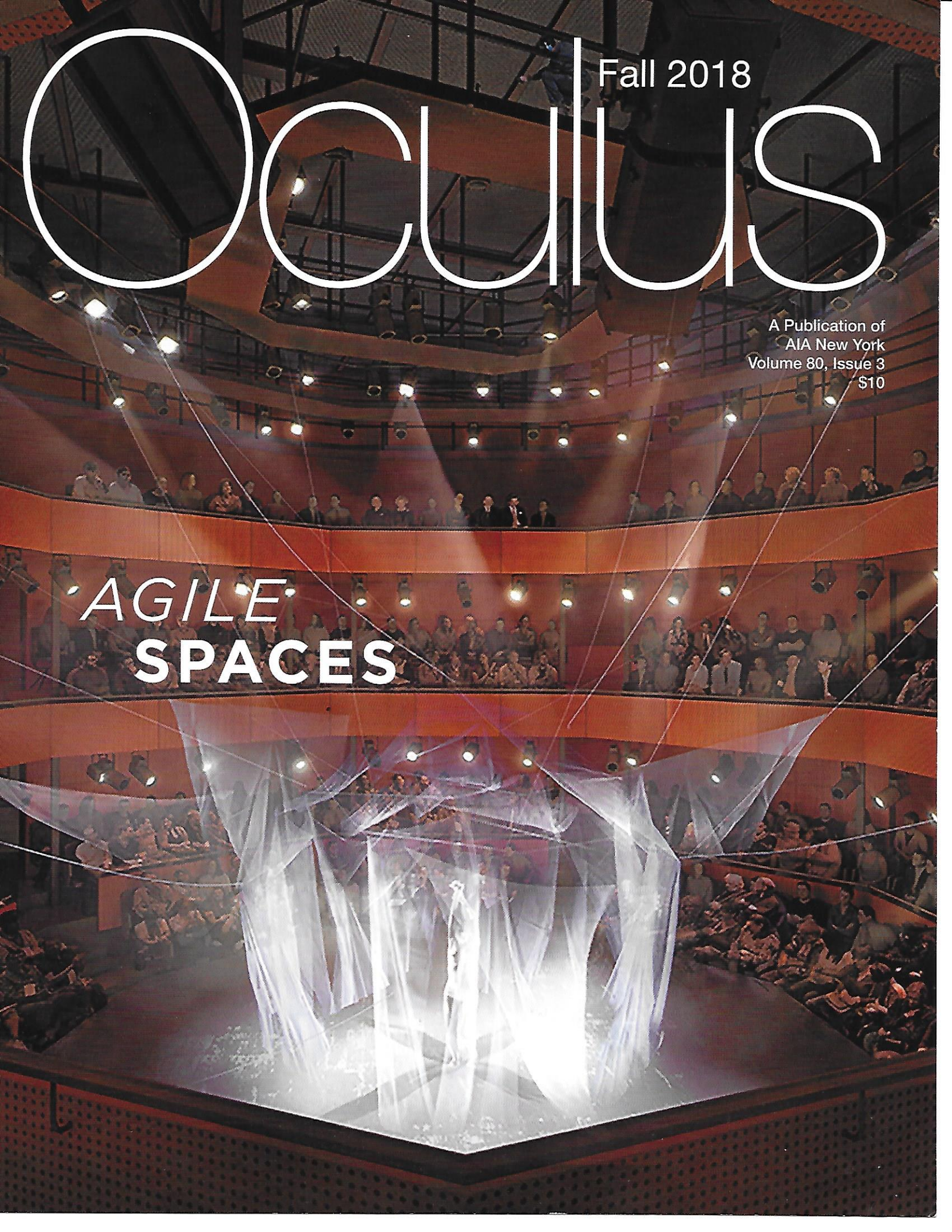


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AGILE
SPACES



STREET LEVEL

FREEMAN PLAZA WEST

BY ALEX ULAM WITH CASSANDRA GERARDO



MNLA's Freeman Plaza West viewed from Broome Street.

New York City has committed billions of dollars to containing stormwater runoff, currently a serious threat to surrounding waterways. Landscaping offers an effective filter with additional environmental benefits. The renovation of Freeman Plaza West in Lower Manhattan is part of a multimillion-dollar stormwater runoff initiative in Hudson Square that uses permeable pavement and subsurface tree trenches to capture stormwater. Surrounded by roadways, including the entrance to the Holland Tunnel, where 12 lanes of chaotic city traffic merge into two lanes, the barren plaza was once a prime example of what Rem Koolhaas terms a “junkspace”—an unloved leftover of rapid modernization. But a new design by Mathews Nielsen Landscape Architects (MNLA) transforms the plaza into a highly usable destination, relying on landscape features to structure it. MNLA won the RFP issued by the Hudson Square Business Improvement District (BID) in 2010.

“The BID discovered that 40,000 people work in Hudson Square, yet they would go to SoHo for lunch. The challenge was to create a reason for people to stay in Hudson Square or come to Hudson Square,” says Signe Nielsen of MNLA. “We looked around the district looking for opportunities for open space other than narrowing lanes on Hudson Street. There was a Port Authority parking lot we considered, but purchasing and reimbursing Port Authority seemed a bit of a stretch for our budget. I looked at a plan of the district and saw a huge area that is an entrance to the Holland Tunnel. When I went there, I noticed that once the cars get into lanes for the tunnel, they stop honking because they’re in an orderly staggered sequence. Everyone has calmed down. Traffic is moving at five miles per hour. The fume and noise levels are lower, so I thought, *How about this?*”

Instead of a stone or concrete wall, MNLA used new and preexisting trees to mitigate the impact of roadways on the east

and west sides of the space, and was even able to remove a lane of traffic along a critical boundary. The reimagined island becomes an oasis amid a busy thoroughfare, featuring lounge chairs with umbrellas, a Noguchi play sculpture for

children, an artificial turf area for yoga, and a lending library. “It’s a perfect example of doing very little to make a space that people will appreciate,” says Nielsen. “The budget was \$300,000 and we created two acres of space that people didn’t have before.” ■