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Brooklyn Tow Pound
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Best in Tow?

Brooklyn invests in a greener impound facility, but it's unclear if the gesture will win public approval.



Outside, the tow pound displays its modernity—and its parent agency—like a billboard (above). The utilitarian interior is light and airy, a far cry from qualities of its predecessor.



Heckling isn't exactly customary at architecture awards ceremonies, but then again it isn't every day that the distinction of best new office building goes to a tow pound. "We got this design award from the Brooklyn Chamber of Commerce, and people bood," the architect John Coburn, of Manhattan's SpaceSmith, says matter-of-factly. "No one likes tow pounds." Which prompts the question: How do you design a building nobody wants to be in?

Greening it helps. With copious daylight sluicing through operable windows and energy conservation under way at every possible turn, the 11,000-square-foot north Brooklyn facility is an object lesson in transforming a necessary civic evil into a vision of sustainable design. It is also the marquee project in a larger push to rebrand the surrounding Brooklyn Navy Yard, a storied shipbuilding port turned industrial park, whose PR-savvy operators are determined to paint over more than 150 years of industrial blight. A 2007 mandate requires that all Navy Yard structures be built to LEED Silver standards; the tow pound, which opened last March and commands four and a half acres at one of the yard's main entrances, is on track to earn Gold certification. "We weren't thinking of it as just a tow pound," says Elliot Matz, the executive vice president and chief operating officer of the Brooklyn Navy Yard Development Corporation. "We were thinking of it as a building. We wanted a structure that sent

a message that we're a modern, sustainable industrial park."

There was plenty of room for improvement. The old pound was a crush of decrepit trailers, sunken asphalt, and outhouses, with no pay phones—like something out of *Escape from New York*. Under rigid budget and security constraints, the architects, who've turned out sustainable workplaces for the International Rescue Committee, Lowe Worldwide, and MTV set about designing a simple, well-ventilated environment. A mechanical system with built-in heat recovery sucks in outdoor air without kicking the AC into overdrive, and blue-tinted windows coated in a high-efficiency glazing reflect nearly all the sun's infrared rays (the main culprit in heat gain), freeing SpaceSmith to specify windows just about everywhere. "There isn't a single place in the building where you can't see outside," Coburn says.

As for those picayune amenities that seem to follow LEED projects wherever points are spare, the tow pound actually puts them to use. Rooftop solar reflectors heat water that's piped to staff showers, which are much needed after a shift towing cars (and perhaps dodging tomatoes). And the bike racks set down near the main entrance cater to more than just the usual smattering of health-conscious employees. As Coburn tells it, "You've just had your car towed. You need to get to the pound somehow." Nothing to boo there. ○