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El Timbiriche: Designing for Wellness in Williamsburg's Southside

by *Urban Omnibus*

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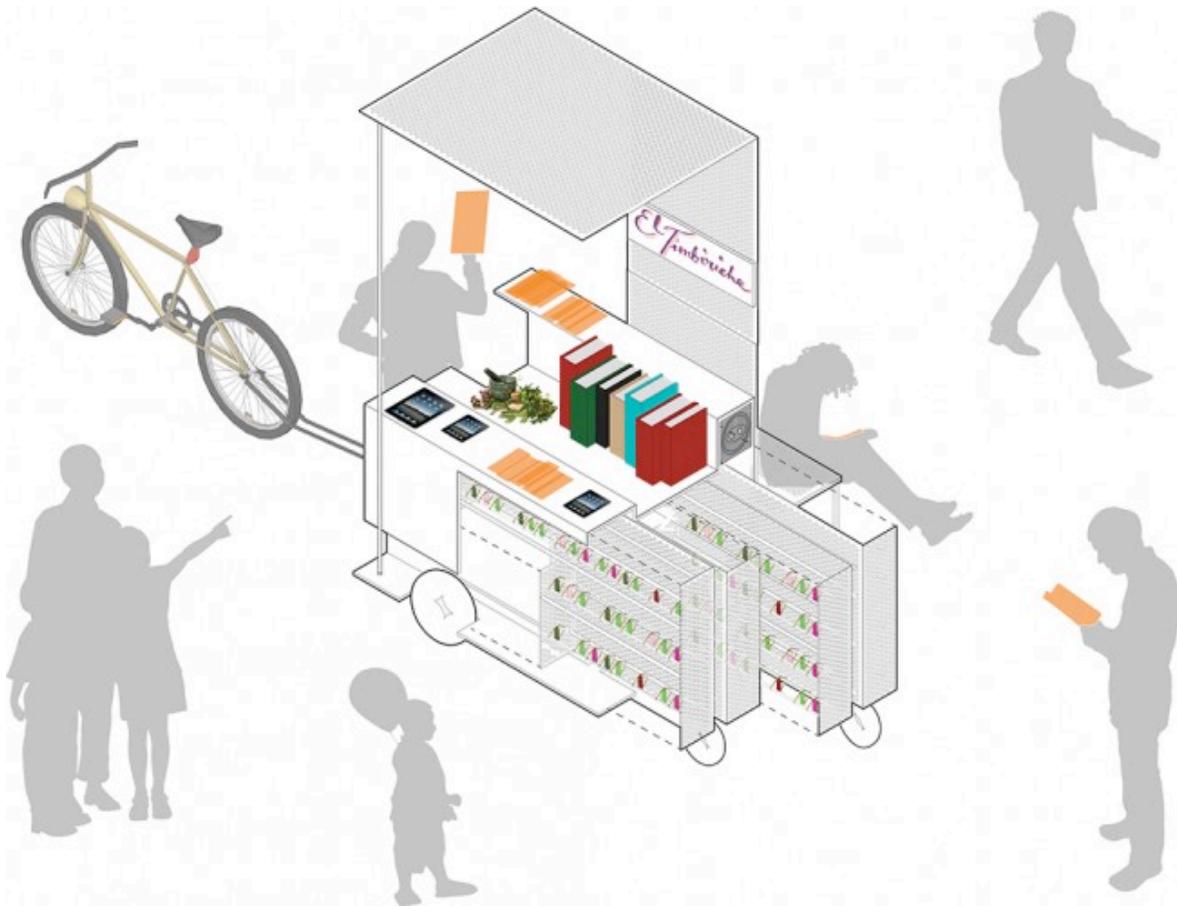
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For a design intervention to have social benefits, it doesn't need to be at the large scale of parks or community master plans. Design at a small and accessible scale can be a tremendously effective tool for social change. Still, design services are frequently out of the financial reach of community-based organizations doing important work throughout the city. **DesigNYC** was established by a group of civic-minded designers to solve that problem by connecting design professionals to groups working on a range of different environmental and social issues because, in their own words, “design is not a luxury”.

The **El Puente Green Light District** is an initiative to “sustain, grow, green, and celebrate” the Southside neighborhood of Williamsburg, including advocating for and promoting a holistic approach to health and wellness in a historically disinvested and environmentally toxic area. In an area where asthma, diabetes, and lack of insurance are significantly more common than the rest of the city, El Puente began to explore *curanderismo*, a tradition of wellness and healing using natural herbs and remedies historically practiced by many of the Latino communities throughout North Brooklyn. To further this effort, DesigNYC connected El Puente with **Farzana Gandhi**, principal of FG Design Studio and Assistant Professor of Architecture at the New York Institute of Technology, to help unlock and share some of the traditions that could help solve critical issues threatening the wellbeing of many members of the community, and thus the long-term health of the community itself.

The result was **el Timbiriche**, a concept for a mobile health and wellness unit that provides a physical tool to study and share the existing cultural knowledge entrenched in the community using El Puente's existing assets and the fabric of the neighborhood. Click [here](#) for more details on the design and future of the project and read on for our conversation with designer **Farzana Gandhi** and El Puente Green Light District's Director **Anusha Venkataraman** and Health and Wellness Coordinator **Gabriela Alvarez** about how this versatile new tool could leverage the community's traditions to solve some of its most pressing contemporary challenges.

- *D.R.*



How did the project start?

Anusha Venkataraman, El Puente: El Puente’s Green Light District initiative is a 10-year sustainability and equity campaign that takes an individual wellness approach to community development. We look at what our community needs to be healthy, to live sustainably, and to have access to quality education, arts, and cultural expression. This year’s DesigNYC theme of health and wellness was a perfect fit with our approach.

Gabriela Alvarez, El Puente: The Green Light District initiative has its roots in holistic wellness, so we discussed what traditions already existed in our community that we could highlight. El Puente had a program called Community Thursdays that involved talking to community members about *remedios caseros* (home remedies) that had been passed down from their parents and grandparents. Using herbs from El Puente’s community garden on South 2nd Street, people demonstrated these remedies. We discussed how there are no longer *botanicas* — small shops that sold ingredients for these remedies — in the neighborhood, but that we want to grow the knowledge that still exists. El Timbiriche is a mobile *botanica* concept, a unit that moves through the community, collecting traditional knowledge of *curanderismo* from elderly members of the community and sharing it with younger generations. The project is about empowering people to engage actively with that kind of communication: the passing down of traditions.



A traditional botanica

Venkataraman: The practices people have used for generations aren't always recognized as relevant to health and wellness in daily life. Our community faces high rates of asthma, diabetes, and obesity, and many community members are uninsured or don't have access to affordable healthcare. By collecting these practices, we can let people know about easy, affordable ways to improve their health, all while empowering people. It's not about changing everything you do; it's about recognizing what you already know, what you're already doing, and what works in your family.

How did those goals lead to the design for el Timbiriche? Walk me through the process and the various elements of the mobile unit.

Farzana Gandhi: I became involved when DesigNYC matched me with El Puente. This project was a great fit as my work often operates on a number of scales to make small changes of large social significance. To me, the design for el Timbiriche has potential at the scale of a single product, at an architectural scale to activate public space, and at a neighborhood scale to take full advantage of the unit's mobility. I am also working with graphic artist, Pablo Delcán, to create a branding identity and a web-based database to complement the physical cart and urban strategy. El Timbiriche aims to make tradition and information accessible, both visibly and spatially. The fact that it can move around the community is a huge advantage over operating a stationary shop. It reaches people that wouldn't normally be reached. As an urban space intervention, it becomes a placemaker that a passerby on the street might actually engage.



Community Thursdays | Courtesy of El Puente

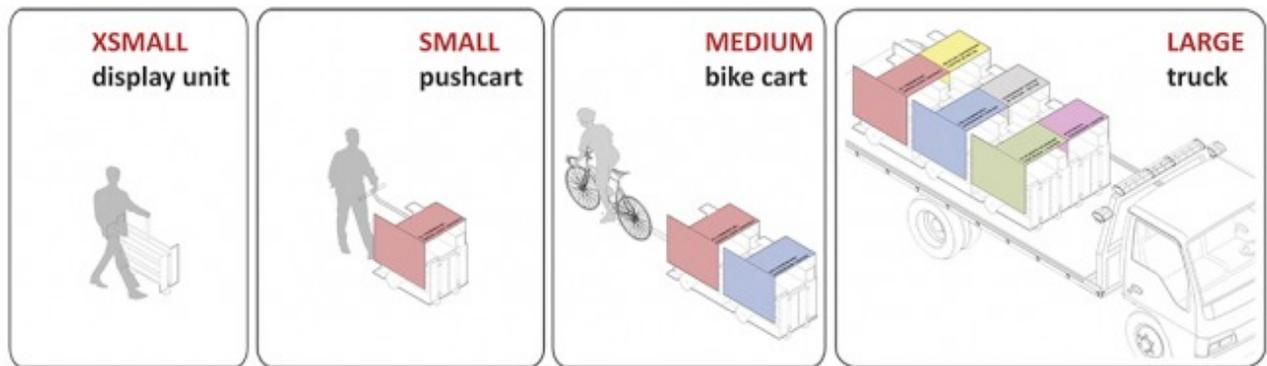
The design process started with a lot of information gathering, through meetings with El Puente and workshops with community members. I learned about all the programming that El Puente offers at various locations. As a mobile unit, this item has the potential to figuratively and physically stitch together that programming and bring together sometimes disparate efforts into an iconic place within the community.

We wanted to get into the heads of El Puente and the community members that we hope will eventually embrace this project. What were their needs and wants, what excited them? The project is an opportunity to rethink mobile street furniture. Looking at precedents like hot dog stands or food trucks, they are inward facing; the activity is private and then the vending becomes public. How do you make all of the activities associated with that cart accessible, and also participatory for the public? How big does this cart have to be? Are we looking at a pushcart, a bike cart, something the size of a food truck? The community responded well to all of those options, so the unit's modularity and flexibility allow multiple units to be recombined in various ways for different scales and uses.



El Timbiriche loosely translates to “small shop” or “kiosk.” The design is fairly simple: it’s a roughly 42 inch wide by 30 inch deep by 42 inch high mobile unit made out of plywood, perforated metal, and threaded rods. A canopy structure can fold down when the cart is in storage. The “folded” plywood surface allows for display and demonstrations. Shelving units extend from the cart to become a larger presence on the street or can pull all the way out and become standalone items.

Venkataraman: The smallest unit can fit through a doorway for storage purposes and ease of transport. If we did want to bring one — or more than one, hooked together — to another neighborhood, we could put it on the back of a bike and haul it there. A larger, `truck' scale is something that community members have been really excited about.



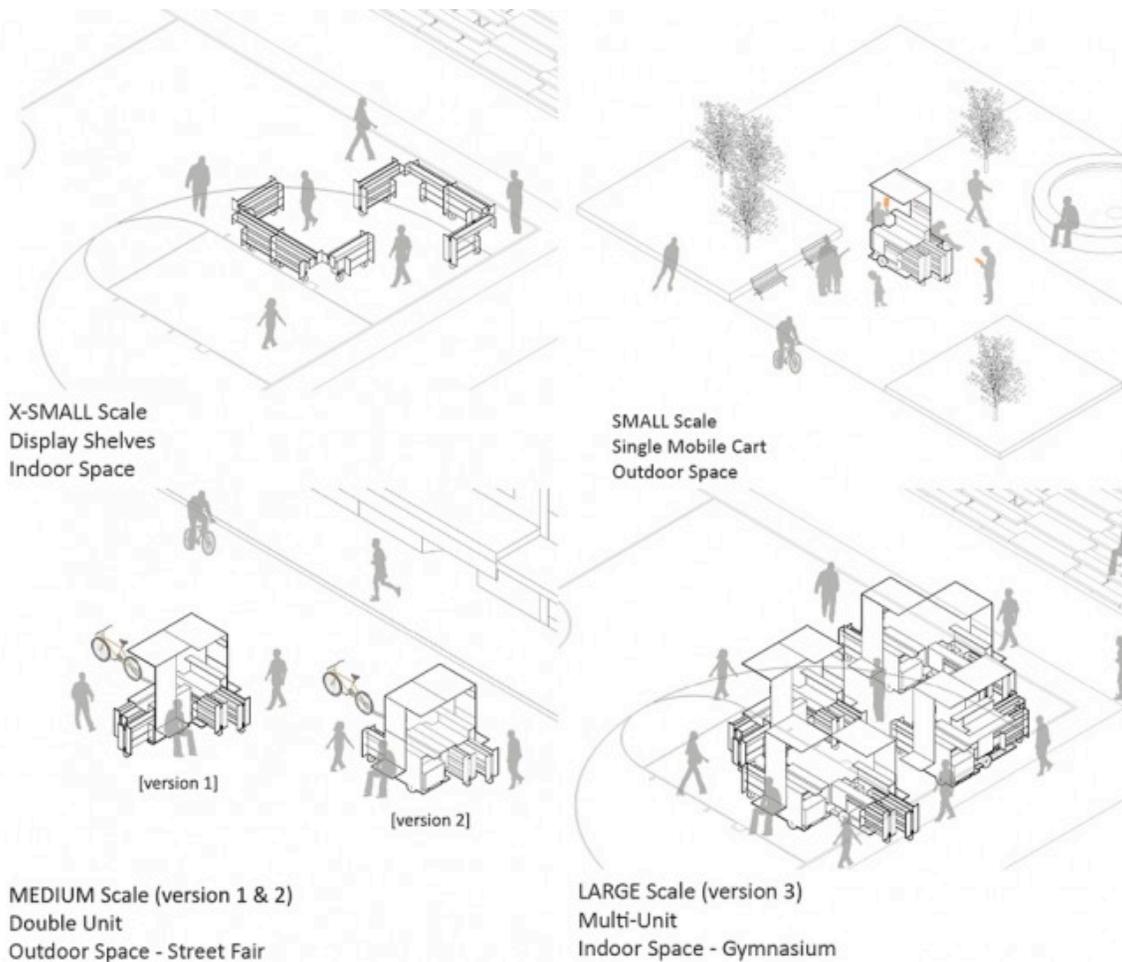
Alvarez: This flexibility is important for how we think about health, wellness, and *curanderismo*. Being creative about how we as a community come back to those traditions, who is coming back to those traditions, and where we're engaging with that knowledge is really important to revive it from being taboo or forgotten. It can come back into our lives because it is ours, in our spaces, with our people.

Gandhi: If the unit is built as a bike cart, the bike can hook up to a dynamo and produce electricity to charge tablets and LED lighting, so that the cart could be out on the street at night as well. Neighborhood kids and adults alike can enjoy exercise for 10 minute intervals on-site. This is a hands-on way to supplement the wellness education received at the unit. There's also a long history of murals and various forms of artistic expression in the community, so the plywood is painted with chalkboard paint encouraging the public to add their identity — and also their recipes — to the project. Because the unit will be shared with people outside of El Puente, we were mindful of security and the durability in the design. There is lockable storage if it is left out on the street to work as a standalone unit. And the unit is low-tech in its assembly and fabrication, which is important because we will be building them with community volunteers. We're making an investment that will have diverse and heavy uses, so it needs to be durable, hence material choices like metal.

How will people engage with it?

Gandhi: The unit will both collect and distribute information. I've proposed a number of routes for the unit to travel through the neighborhood. One taps into areas where the elderly may be found — the library, the senior center — to collect information. Another would distribute information in parks and schools in the area. The last route would travel to El Puente's gardens to connect with their programming and harvest herbs so as to have a supply on hand.

Venkataraman: We already have workshops and programs in our youth leadership centers and partner with local daycares and senior centers. El Timbiriche would amplify those efforts, bring in additional resources, and draw attention to this work we're already doing. We go to plenty of events that have tabling opportunities. This is something that would change that model and be more visual and interactive to draw people in. If we took it to an event or our own community garden, we would have this mobile workshop space that would fold out to be the table, store workshop materials, act as a prep surface for food, and house other books and resources. It would provide a new way for people to engage with our work.



Do you see using this unit exclusively for health and wellness or for other missions as well?

Venkataraman: We see this initial prototype as always being el Timbiriche, but there's enough flexibility within the concept that future units can serve different missions. Even one health and wellness unit can be used in different ways: we could bring it to our street fair this weekend and have a healthy cooking demo at 2 o'clock and then record family stories about healing practices at 3 o'clock. We want people to share ideas that we haven't thought of yet and, in time, we hope to have enough young people, community members, and staff members that understand the unit's functionality that they will reach out to borrow it for other missions. We see this as a growing project and that will help us expand our networks. The technical assistance that Farzana's providing through design and instructions means that there's a lot of potential for this concept beyond the initial design phase and the prototype.

Gandhi: The challenge of building a multitude of these units for different functions in different places is fascinating to me as a designer; it pushes you to think about how one mobile unit can function one way but two can work as modules to become something grander on the street. If there are multiple carts built, they can become urban furniture to help activate social spaces on the street. When you have two or three carts in relationship to one another, then you can start approaching the 'truck' scale that creates its own space that people can sit within. This is a kit of parts, not just from the assembly point of view, but in that the unit can become a part of a larger system. It can have one life inside a school gymnasium or a completely different life on the street for a street fair or a different presence as a single standalone unit in a community garden.



Photos by Tina Orlandini | Courtesy of El Puente

Venkataraman: The whole project intersects with cultural expression in our community. We had the WEPA! Festival a few weeks ago and saw a broad range of Latinos from the community celebrating in the streets, listening to music, and dancing in a neighborhood that is rapidly gentrifying. That public expression is important, and the same goes for the expression of our health and wellness practices. In many of our arts and cultural projects we want to affirm as Latinos that we are here to stay because we're healthy, we make our streets more livable places, and we are working together to improve our local schools. We support each other. Being a part of a strong community is also about knowing how we take care of ourselves and how we make sure we can be here, and our children can be here.

We can also share the values of our culture with others. There are many other cultures with their own healing practices. How can we share that knowledge with each other? “El puente” means “the bridge”, so that has always been an integral part of our mission.

Gandhi: Community building happens on the street. It's a part of public space. This culture of coming together and exchanging ideas and knowledge is something the project embraces.

Unless otherwise noted, all images courtesy of FG Design Studio.

*Anusha Venkataraman is an urban planner, activist, writer, and artist, and is currently the Director of the Green Light District at El Puente in Brooklyn. Anusha completed her Masters in City and Regional Planning at the Pratt Institute and a bachelor's degree in International Relations at Brown University. Prior to her work in NYC, Anusha was the Youth and Outreach Director at the Steel Yard, an industrial arts community center in Providence, Rhode Island. Anusha edited *Intractable Democracy: Fifty Years of Community-Based Planning (2010)*, assistant edited *Beyond Zuccotti Park: Freedom of Assembly and the Occupation of Public Space(2012)*, and is a contributing editor of *Outpost Journal*.*

Native New Yorker Gabriela Alvarez studied Community Health at Brown University and went on to become a holistic health coach and health-supportive chef. As Health and Wellness Coordinator at El Puente, she develops and implements a wide range of programming that seeks to empower and create avenues for healthy living.

Farzana Gandhi, LEED AP is Principal of [FG Design Studio](#), an independent platform for architectural design and research pushing innovation within socially conscious and sustainable thought. The studio embraces a multi-disciplinary and research-driven approach to find unique opportunities through critical analysis. Farzana is also an Assistant Professor of Architecture at the [New York Institute of Technology](#), where she has taught introductory, advanced, and thesis-level architecture design studios as well as visualization seminars for over 6 years. Farzana earned a Masters in Architecture with Distinction from the Harvard Graduate School of Design.