

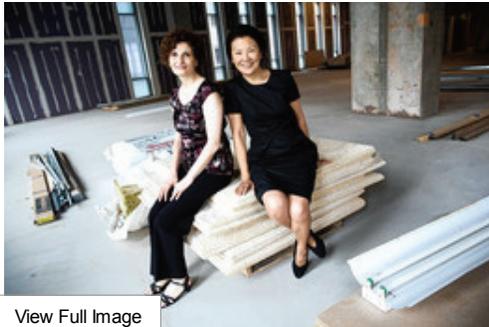
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Small Theaters With Big Ideas

By ELLEN GAMERMAN

Architect Toshiko Mori was faced with a challenge. She had to create a dark theater in a bright space with sunlight streaming through floor-to-ceiling windows. Her proposal: Build lightweight, moveable walls that could either block or use the natural light, depending on the show. The idea turned out to be a winner.

The Alliance of Resident Theatres/New York, an advocacy organization for 300 not-for-profit theaters in the city, announced this week that it had chosen Ms. Mori from 14 architects in a competition to design two 99-seat theaters. A.R.T./New York has received \$14.4 million from the city and state over the last two years for the capital project from the Bloomberg administration, the New York City Council, Manhattan Borough President Scott Stringer and the state assembly, according to the organization's executive director, Ginny Louloudes.

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Brian Harkin for The Wall Street Journal

Ginny Louloudes, left, the executive director for the A.R.T./New York, and architect Toshiko Mori in the second-floor construction space that will become a 99-seat theater in the Archstone Clinton building.

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The two theaters will reside inside a pricy new Hell's Kitchen high-rise rental and condominium complex, stretching from 51st Street to 53rd Street, called Archstone Clinton. They are expected to open in 2013 and will be rented at subsidized rates to smaller theater companies. The city, which owned the property originally, required that the new complex provide space for not-for-profit arts organizations after a local theater was displaced to make way for the residential complex, owned by the Dermot Company.

Eventually, the complex will house five theaters run by three different companies. Joining A.R.T./New York there is the 52ND Street Project, which moved in earlier this year and began performances in its theater space. The MCC Theater, now using the Lucille Lortel Theatre on Christopher Street, plans to create a permanent home there as well, according to a person familiar with the project.

The two A.R.T./New York theaters will experiment with sound as well as light. Since there will also be public spaces and rehearsal rooms on the same floors as the new theaters, Ms. Mori says she's considering creating room partitions made from light, spongy materials that absorb sound.

"It will be quite an amazing space—a publicly accessible space that [allows] amazing flexibility to do innovative types of

staging," said Ms. Mori, a former Harvard University architecture department chair who still serves on the faculty and designs commercial, residential and cultural spaces. Among her previous arts projects: an 80-seat auditorium at the Farnsworth Art Museum in Rockland, Maine, and a multipurpose arts showcase inside Brown

University's humanities center.

Ms. Mori was selected last fall, and work on the designs began in earnest last month. The construction comes as small theaters struggle to find homes and affordable performance spaces. "Sometimes theaters just disappear because the building they were in gets knocked down and turned into something else or sold and the new landlord wants to rent to someone who can pay more," Ms. Louloudes said.

Nevertheless, Hell's Kitchen is serving as a mini-cultural magnet. The Archstone Clinton building is a stone's throw from Ensemble Studio Theatre on 52nd Street, and the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater and Women's Project theater company a few blocks away on 55th. The Intar Theatre, a Latino theater company, had been located in a walk-up building that was knocked down to make room for Archstone Clinton. Community leaders demanded that the new builder offer Intar a theater there, but Intar passed due to concerns about costs. A.R.T./New York is currently trying to raise \$5 million to help theater companies rent space in the new building and at two other venues it manages.

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