

DAILY NEWS

New York**'I treat every space as public projects'****Big Town, Big Dreams**BY [J.R. TAYLOR](#)

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"I treat every space as public projects," says architect [Ricardo Zurita](#), "sometimes to the dismay of my clients."

He's speaking as a longtime New Yorker who grew up in the city's public places. Today, the 48-year-old head of Zurita Architects oversees several city projects.

His firm designed [Icahn Stadium](#) on [Randalls Island](#), and it is currently developing projects ranging from the redesign of 1 Penn Plaza to a smaller park on 34th St.

There are also residences and commercial businesses - along with additional spaces for sports and recreation on Randalls Island.

[Elmhurst, Queens](#), "was a wonderful place to grow up in," Zurita recalls, "but the government resources were quite scarce. This was in the late '60s and '70s.

"I have vivid memories - actually, good memories - of heading out to play in the public tennis courts in [Queens](#)," he continues. "We'd have to hop a fence because they were locked up, and we'd have our own brooms to sweep away the trash so we'd have room to play. That was a big part of our play: bringing a broom."

Zurita moved to Queens from [Ecuador](#) at the age of 5 - at a time when South American immigrants were just coming to the city. "It sounds funny now, but being from Ecuador was quite exotic then," he says.

His parents had followed a "typical path" of immigrants.

"They came here essentially to better themselves. My dad came first, and my mother shortly thereafter. They split up the kids, and we were left behind in the care of our grandparents."



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Architect Ricardo Zurita finds inspiration in the dilapidated city parks of his youth.

He once asked his mother why she left them behind - "not as a complaint, but out of curiosity."

"She said that she'd heard too many stories about husbands who came to [America](#) and stayed on by themselves," Zurita said. "By the time we came of school age, we were all back together."

Zurita would go on to graduate from [Cornell University's School](#) of Architecture, Art and Planning. He went to work for a [New York](#) firm, but found his first big break while traveling.

"I'd grown restless," he says, "and wanted to see more of the world. I moved to [Spain](#) and got a job there. I missed New York terribly, but the climate was very good because the 1992 [Barcelona](#) Olympics were coming. The country was remaking itself. I'd gone to work for a wonderful firm and had the good fortune to work on the athletes training center for the Olympics. That was my first sports project, so it was straight to the top."

Before returning to New York, though, Zurita would find himself back in Ecuador.

"My wife and I moved there because I wanted to get to know my family better," he recalled. "My parents had been the only ones to come to America. ... They embraced me as a wandering native son."

To this day, he gives lectures back home, and just last year took a group of architects there. "But I remember landing at JFK when we returned in 1993, and just thinking that this was it," he says. "I was back home."

The Chelsea resident has also discovered the joys and complexities of [New York City](#) as a client. Even some privately funded projects still require approval from the city.

[Aimee Boden](#), the park administrator for Randalls Island and the executive director of the [Randalls Island Sports Foundation](#), has seen how Zurita has worked with the many challenges of the city's public spaces.

"It's New York City," says Boden, "so this kind of development hears from a mix of people who don't all speak in the same voice. I remember how vital Ricardo was in hosting what became two years of meetings with the communities in East [Harlem](#) and central Harlem and the [South Bronx](#).

"He has a confidence that's really important," she adds. "Icahn Stadium was a \$42 million project, and Ricardo provided this excitement and enthusiasm that was a big part of raising local money and private support."

Meanwhile, Zurita keeps designing New York City spaces both large and small.

"You're only as good as your next project," he says. "We have some enormous ones, but I've noticed how much pleasure we get from smaller spaces. We can work at this very small level of scale, and we're like tinkers. We can get it perfect. The big picture is pretty big, and the refinements are - well, they're still pretty big, too."

"One of my professors," Zurita adds, "told me that you get what you deserve. He told me that as a warning, but I was hoping that maybe it would be true. I grew up in Queens spending all my time in the neighborhood park with a basketball under my arm. I've always loved sports, so I thought maybe the curse could be a blessing."