



Program Summary

Decarbonize by Design: The Transformative Impact of Charrettes

Program Brief

On September 25, during Climate Week 2024, NYSERDA, BE-Ex, RMI, and Urban Land Institute (ULI) hosted a second event as part of a series for the [Retrofit Playbook for Large Buildings](#), showcasing featured partners from the Empire Building Challenge that utilized problem-solving approaches, like design charrettes, to cut emissions now without compromising on their future goals.

The Empire Building Challenge (EBC)

is a \$50 million NYSERDA program that accelerates the decarbonization of tall buildings through public-private partnerships to bring scalable carbon-neutral retrofit approaches to the New York market.

Retrofit Playbook for Large Buildings

is a knowledge-sharing platform dedicated to supporting building owners, operators, and their design and engineering teams in creating cost-effective, long-term decarbonization strategies for large buildings.

Program Highlights

Through opening remarks given by ULI and NYSERDA, participants learned about a proven decarbonization planning approach that integrates technical solutions with pragmatic asset management strategies known as Resource Efficient Decarbonization (RED), and how project teams can transform their thinking about building decarbonization and generate cogent plans that incorporate long-term flexibility to future-proof their assets utilizing [design charrettes](#).

Participants then heard from EBC partners at Paths Construction and RUHL, who are utilizing these planning tools, including design charrettes and the RED framework, to produce successful, flexible retrofit projects for their buildings.

Following the one-hour hybrid segment of opening remarks, presentations, and a panel discussion featuring industry experts from NYC Economic Development Corporation (EDC) and Steven Winter Associates, in-person participants met with the featured EBC partners and asked questions about their decarbonization projects in facilitated discussions with additional leaders from NYC Housing Preservation & Development (HPD), NYSERDA, and ULI.

Program Takeaways

Presentations

Abdulla Darrat
Director, Construction Manager
Paths Construction

Michael Ruhl
Owner
RUHL

Opening Remarks

Marta Schantz
Co-Executive Director
Randall Lewis Center for Sustainability in
Real Estate
ULI

Sophie Cardona
Senior Project Manager
NYSERDA

Panelists

Abdulla Darrat
Director, Construction Manager
Paths Construction

Nicole Ceci, moderator
Principal Mechanical Engineer
Steven Winter Associates

Michael Ruhl
Owner
RUHL

Jonathan Thompson
Vice President, Director of Energy
NYCEDC

Moderators

Jennifer Leone
Chief Sustainability Officer
NYCHPD

Marta Schantz
Co-Executive Director
Randall Lewis Center for Sustainability in
Real Estate
ULI

Charrettes can help project teams shift their thinking from short- to long-term.

Integrating retrofits into major milestones of a master plan (including planned maintenance, recapitalizations, or redevelopments) can help make retrofits more palatable to building owners. While phasing decarbonization is a longer process, it creates far more value.

Identifying the co-benefits of a retrofit project can help build support for implementation.

Identifying the non-energy benefits (e.g. comfort, acoustics) associated with a project can help paint a more holistic picture of the retrofit's value add and help build support for project implementation. Project teams must always weigh co-benefit values with financial costs and set goals to determine the 'hard' and 'soft' return on investments.

Charrettes can help encourage holistic, whole-systems thinking.

Owners benefit from adopting a long-term approach towards decarbonization, rather than focusing on one-to-one replacements or technology specific solutions. For example, a boiler replacement could reveal a broader heat recovery opportunity when thinking holistically with phased decarbonization in mind. Charrettes offer an opportunity for meaningful collaboration and development of innovative solutions.

Communicate early and often to build relationships.

Involving project engineers as early as possible in the design process is key to ensure that feasibility and design intent can be addressed at the outset. Identify project team members and the personalities best suited for design charrette participation to achieve the most successful outcome.

Charrettes can reveal increased property valuation from a retrofit project.

For assets with planned short-term turnover, charrettes can help illuminate how energy efficiency and decarbonization retrofits increase a property's valuation, which is especially vital when considering upcoming Local Law 97 fine exposure potential.

Charrettes are for everyone. Design charrettes are beneficial for all building owners, regardless of building classification or available resources. Embracing open-mindedness and diverse perspectives is key to developing successful retrofits.

Want to review your plan with our experts? [Request a design charrette.](#)