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Architect James Leng designs birdhouse for Vilcek Foundation rooftop

The Vilcek Foundation rooftop is now the site of a new birdhouse designed by prizewinning architect James Leng with Jennifer Ly at Figure

NEW YORK, June 22, 2023—The Vilcek Foundation takes its appreciation of design to new heights this spring with the installation of a [birdhouse](#) designed by architects James Leng and Jennifer Ly of *Figure* on the roof of the foundation’s Manhattan headquarters.

The [project](#) was conceived in early 2020 by Vilcek Foundation President Rick Kinsel, in discussion with James Leng, recipient of the 2018 Vilcek Prize for Creative Promise in Architecture. Born in China, Leng is a founding partner of the San Francisco–based architecture office *Figure*. The foundation’s Creative Promise Prizes in architecture recognize and celebrate immigrant architects whose early-career work represents a significant contribution to their field. The purpose of the prizes is to raise awareness of the diversity of ways that immigrants and immigration enrich art, design, culture, and society in the United States.

Said Kinsel, “In the spring of 2020, when the COVID-19 health emergency paused production of many art, design, and architecture projects, it was important to me to identify ways that the Vilcek Foundation could partner with immigrant creators in our network to develop projects that could provide artists, architects, and designers with meaningful work and a source of income.

“The introspective nature of that period when we were all working from home led me, James, and many others to reconnect with the natural world around us,” said Kinsel. “James and Jennifer at *Figure* undertook detailed studies of 13 bird species of NYC, incorporating environmental considerations including height, wind, exposure, and habitat needs to create a suitable dwelling structure that is aesthetically and conceptually unique.”

Initial concepts included different designs suited to the needs of different species. Most bird nests fall into a few categories, including solitary cavity nests (single-occupancy enclosed nests with an external entrance); column nests (built in chimney-like spaces); and colony nests (for birds that prefer to share larger dwellings with multiple entrances). Concepts were customized for different potential tenants—from Carolina Wrens to Purple Martins.

“It was quite a unique opportunity to be asked to design a house for a bird,” said Leng. “In one sense, being the architects that we are, we approached it as if we were designing a house for a client: What would a resident bird want and need in their home? At the same time, we thought that this project really should be about the intertwined stories of wildlife ecology and material ecology; it is as much about the lives of birds and their habitats as it is the life cycles of the materials we use to construct habitats.”

Leng and Ly engaged Ben Rosenberg of Silman, a TYLin Company, as the structural engineer on the project. Robert Rising, owner and operator of NY City Slab was brought on as the lead fabricator for the design.

The final concept selected makes use of a log of Eastern Cedar (*Juniperus virginiana*)—a coniferous tree native to New York and the Eastern United States. Working with material experts, Leng and the team at *Figure* developed the birdhouse's final form, infusing the organic material and surface with a uniquely modern sensibility. The final form is a tall, narrow column turned from a single log, with deep notches that recall terraced roofs and pediments sculpted into the sides. The birdhouse stands over eight feet in height, with a private entry for a single avian occupant situated approximately six feet off the ground.

"We definitely wanted to be a bit playful in addressing the unorthodox context of the birdhouse: our birdhouse as a series of vertically stacked domestic forms, itself sitting on top of the stacked forms of a Manhattan skyscraper," said Leng. "We joked that it could be a luxury high-rise condo for one lucky bird."

Once the design was complete, the foundation worked to comply with permit requirements and to consider timing for installation in alignment with season and habitat needs. The birdhouse was installed in March 2023, timed to coincide with the migratory season when the city sees an influx of avian visitors.

Learn more at the Vilcek Foundation: [Architect James Leng designs birdhouse for Vilcek Foundation Rooftop](#)

The Vilcek Foundation

The Vilcek Foundation raises awareness of immigrant contributions in the United States and fosters appreciation for the arts and sciences. The foundation was established in 2000 by Jan and Marica Vilcek, immigrants from the former Czechoslovakia. The mission of the foundation was inspired by the couple's respective careers in biomedical science and art history. Since 2000, the foundation has awarded over \$7 million in prizes to foreign-born individuals and has supported organizations with over \$6 million in grants.

The Vilcek Foundation is a private operating foundation, a federally tax-exempt nonprofit organization under IRS Section 501(c)(3). To learn more, please visit vilcek.org.