

A F F O R D A B L E H O U S I N G

ISSUES

SHIMBERG CENTER FOR AFFORDABLE HOUSING

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Design Matters in Affordable Housing

The City Design Center at the University of Illinois is in the process of preparing an "Affordable Housing Design Catalog." The following article announcing development of the catalog appeared in the Designer/Builder: A Journal of the Human Environment published by Fine Additions, Inc. of Santa Fe, NM and is reproduced here with their permission.

Poor people, as well as rich ones, have a right to well-designed housing that's culturally appropriate, that's built of durable materials, that meets their needs and aspirations, and that they can afford. Based upon that fundamental assumption, the City Design Center at the University of Illinois in Chicago is creating the *Affordable Housing Design Catalog* to bring together - first on the Internet and later in print - the best affordable projects built in the last fifteen years.

The catalog will demonstrate that quality affordable housing can be produced because it has been done, from a single unit up to multiple units; it's been done in rural, urban, and suburban areas; it's been done for many kinds of households; it's been done for many kinds of cultural groups; and it's been done by many kinds of developers - for-profit, nonprofit, big firms, little firms.

"In order to prove it's possible to give poor people quality housing," says Roberta Feldman, co-founder of the City Design Center and the driving force behind the *Affordable Housing Design Catalog*, "we can't use words, we can't use drawings, and we can't use ideas. We have to show real stuff. If you're going to convince people who have doubts about this - and a lot of people do - you have to

prove it's possible by showing them projects that have been built."

Anyone who has developed a quality affordable housing project is welcome to submit their work for inclusion in the *Affordable Housing Design Catalog* by contacting the City Design Center, either by fax (312-996-2076), e-mail (cdesignc@uic.edu), or by mail (1301 University Hall, 601 South Morgan Street, Chicago, IL 60607-7112).

Further information is posted on the Internet at <http://affordablehousing.aa.uic.edu>.



Design Matters

Best Practices
in Affordable Housing

Background

Throughout its history, the US government has shown remarkable resistance to housing the poor. The task traditionally fell to religious and charitable organizations. The federal government didn't get involved until the 1930s, and then only under duress. Even today, less than 2 percent of all Americans live in government-subsidized housing, compared with close to 20 percent throughout most of the industrialized world. "In this country, we believe that the poor are not worthy of housing assistance," says Feldman, a professor of architecture and environmental psychology at the University of Illinois at Chicago. "We incorrectly believe that housing is not a right, but something that's earned through our own industriousness. People who cannot afford housing are therefore unworthy. It's really that simple."

In fact, the federal government did not get into the business of providing subsidized housing until there developed what was considered a *worthy* poor, those who had lost their jobs during the Great Depression. And the first public housing residents not only had to be nuclear families, they had to have jobs in order to be able to pay rent. "We didn't even provide for the people on the bread line," Feldman says.

Many of the housing projects built by the federal government in the last fifty years have been disasters, reinforcing official reluctance to become more involved. Yet today there are 50 million Americans who are under-housed: they live either in overcrowded conditions, dilapidated and unsafe housing, or on the street. Despite what officials describe as a hot economy with the lowest unemployment in thirty years, millions still can't afford a home. So the need for affordable housing is greater than ever.

Impetus for the Catalog

The *Affordable Housing Design Catalog* is being funded in part by the Fannie Mae Foundation, which put out an RFP for university/community partnerships that would focus on housing-based revitalization. A second grant came from the Richard H. Driehaus Foundation, whose namesake has been attempting to promote high-quality design, not only in the profit market but in the nonprofit sector as well. Other private donors concerned about quality housing for all Americans have also contributed. The catalog is being assembled under the auspices of the UIC Community Design Center in the College of Architecture and the Arts, which was founded by Feldman and co-director George Hemmens to

provide design services to those segments of the population that are generally ignored.

Feldman came up with the idea for the catalog after receiving an average of one to four phone calls a month from groups around the country requesting assistance on how to design good affordable housing. They want to do it, but they don't know how. And they want good examples of what has worked. When completed in 2001, the catalog will be published on the Internet. Plans are underway for a printed version that will include the entire catalog plus some reflection on the history of the design of affordable housing, where it's going, what obstacles it faces, and where future support will come from. "We will be providing information on the best practices in the design of affordable housing," she says. "I hope the catalog will include seventy-five examples, and it would be wonderful if we got more."

And to make sure that the Internet site is easy to access and use for all of the possible audiences, they have put together a user group (that includes three nonprofit developers, a for-profit developer, three architects, a financial person, an advocate of universal accessibility, at least two residents of low-income housing, and a real estate agent) to test its effectiveness.

Housing Designs

Since the middle of the nineteenth century, the call for public housing has elicited three different responses when it comes to design. First were those who claimed housing design certainly matters, provided it fell into a few acceptable models: utopian schemes of model communities; company towns built by industrialists who wanted to keep their workers happy and obligated; and the Modernist models that pushed for uniform design to promote industrial and economic efficiency of housing. Then there are those who, reflecting on the current deplorable conditions of residents living in public housing, say design doesn't make a difference. Finally there are those who say design might matter, but it costs too much. Lately there's been a move by HUD to reinvent government-assisted public housing as a mixed-income model that uses the design perspective of the New Urbanists. They want to take poor people who don't have jobs, put them in lovely archetypes of small-town America where people behaved in ways that are mythicized as good and proper, and let them live side by side with working people who will act as mentors and teach them to become "good working people" as well.

"Using housing design as a means of social control is a paternalistic concept based on a middle-class

desire to teach people how to behave like themselves,” Feldman says. This idea assumes you can uplift the poor and teach them how to be “good, middle-class citizens” by putting them in middle-class types of housing, and that good housing will produce “good people.” “This is environmental determinism in the extreme,” she says. “But it’s worse than that, because we know that the housing and the physical environment cannot cure the *real* problems of poverty, which are not having enough money and being victimized by discrimination.”

It’s time, Feldman believes, to reframe the debate and commit to developing well-designed affordable housing that responds to the needs and aspirations of its occupants, not its designers. It must respond to diverse cultures, many of which use space very differently than the idealized American nuclear family. It must respond to diverse types of families, like singles, single-headed households, unrelated adults, extended families, and seniors, for which the private market is not providing affordable housing. And despite some vague democratic ideal of equality, it must recognize that no single model is going to fit all needs.

Design Considerations

“Designers of affordable housing need to make it adaptable to changing families and changing capabilities,” Feldman says. One of the reasons people move as frequently as they do - on average about once every five years - is to find housing that meets their changing needs and abilities. But since poor people cannot afford to move, designers need to create housing that’s adaptable. “One of the most brilliant things about the first Levittown houses that made them so affordable was that they were easily expandable. From the beginning they were designed so you could finish the attic, enclose the carport, or add a room to the rear as you needed more space,” she says.

“There are ways to design rooms so they are less specific in how they have to be used,” Feldman says. For example, the good old Victorian flat always had one of its three bedrooms next to the living room or dining room. That wonderful, ambiguous space actually turns out to be quite flexible, because you can use it as a bedroom, a study, or a live/work room where clients can come in off the street and not penetrate into the deeper, more private areas of the house.

Homes should be designed to provide for changes in our physical capabilities. In many Scandinavian homes, for example, the kitchen cabinets can be removed and the countertops lowered to accommo-

date a wheelchair without having to move out or call in a contractor for a big renovation. “We have not been very creative in this country about how to adapt an environment that is universally accessible without stigmatizing the people who live there,” Feldman says. “We either require the bathroom grab bars to be there, which, frankly, people don’t like to see when they’re well, or else we don’t put them in at all. Under the best of circumstances a certain percentage of handicapped-accessible units are required by local law, when in fact every unit should be made accessible. My colleagues complain that the federal Americans with Disabilities Act regulations cramp their creativity. On the contrary, I think it’s an opportunity for designers to prove they are creative enough to provide beautiful spaces that are accessible to everyone.”

In addition, Feldman believes that affordable housing designers need to assure the physical well-being of the residents of their housing by creating hazard-free indoor environments and crime-resistant exterior ones. “I also believe that we must take seriously the environmental consequences of how we design and build,” Feldman says. “We have to think about such issues as energy and resource sustainability. We cannot keep wasting our world’s resources. The impacts of building affordable housing are no different from that of any other type of building.”

Existing Buildings

One way is to recycle existing buildings into dwelling units, she says. There’s no reason to tear down a building once a landlord has abandoned it. “My heart weeps when I go into the West Side of Chicago, where there was so much incredibly beautiful Victorian stone and brick housing,” she says. “Now it looks like Beirut! We’ve pulled it down. We absolutely see no value in it. These are gorgeous buildings that actually have floor plans that make a lot of sense for flexibility. They’re solidly built, yet we’re pulling them down. I think one of the answers to affordable housing is preserving the old and reusing it. And it doesn’t mean that housing has to just come from old houses; it can come from all sorts of other types of wonderful buildings that lend themselves to adaptive reuse projects.”

Aesthetic Quality

Another issue facing affordable housing designers is the question of aesthetic quality when beauty is in the eyes of the beholder. When designing for a specific group of people, architects need some

understanding about what the clients consider to be beautiful. Too often the designer assumes that everyone will like what he or she like.

Developers also confuse aesthetics with increased expense. But using paint or different colors of brick creatively does not substantially change a project's cost. "If you can introduce more than one color you can create a tremendous amount of visual interest on a building's facade," she says. "And when Mike Pyatok adds a simple wooden trellis it makes the building look more lush."

Affordability

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, affordable housing has to be affordable to the user. The first way is to lower initial construction costs.

"There are ways to get construction costs down significantly without compromising quality," Feldman says, which could begin by eliminating literally tons of construction waste left over after the construction of an average single-family home. "In terms of design, Levitt's plan wasted no space by virtually eliminating hallways. Then he built into

his final product opportunities for future expansion. The dilemma in this, of course, is that when you are working with the very poor, even a can of paint is difficult to purchase."

Another way to make homes more affordable is assuring lower lifetime operating and maintenance costs. If a home is built of poor materials and starts to fall apart within a few years, the low-income resident will not be able to keep it up. If it doesn't have good windows, adequate insulation, or a high-efficiency furnace, the occupants won't be able to pay the gas bill to keep it warm.

"I realize that people may treat a lot of our expectations for improving the quality of affordable housing as pie in the sky," Feldman admits. "They might say it's all well intentioned, but that I'm asking for too much: governments won't let it happen; it's going to cost too much; we won't find people to design it or build it, etc., etc. It may sound great, but it won't happen. If I believed that I never would have begun this effort. I think when we're finished the *Affordable Housing Design Catalog* will prove the nay-sayers wrong."

Affordable Housing ISSUES is prepared bi-monthly by the Shimberg Center for Affordable Housing for the purpose of discussing contemporary issues facing affordable housing providers. Reproduction of this newsletter is both permitted and encouraged. Comments or questions regarding the content are welcome and should be addressed to Robert C. Stroh, Director.

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