

Bronx By Design: Why Beauty Matters

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Great public buildings were once the centerpieces of their communities: they inspired, conferred a sense of dignity on the neighborhood and sent a message that its residents deserved the very best. What if people in abandoned or distressed communities regained proximity to elegant architecture, recaptured lost expectations and internalized an entitlement to beautiful lives?

At a time when homelessness and joblessness are at record levels, an inquiry into the value of beautiful architecture and design in affordable housing might seem surreal or academic at best. Never in this country's history have wages and housing costs been farther apart. On average nationally, a family must earn \$15.21 an hour to afford a modest two-bedroom apartment, which is almost three times the minimum wage. In New York State, a minimum wage worker would have to work 147 hours per week to afford a two-bedroom apartment at fair market rents. In New York City more than 38,000 people sleep in shelters each night, double the number five years ago and the largest annual increase since the Great Depression. Unemployment here hovers at 8.8 percent, well above the 5.7 percent rate nationally. And things are about to get worse. President Bush's 2005 HUD budget reduces Section 8 rental subsidies by at least \$1 billion, which would gut affordable rental housing across the country. Low-income urban renters will be hit the hardest and New York – a city of renters – is slated to take the biggest blow. So, where does beauty enter into this dismal equation?

Nearly 10 years ago, the Women's Housing and Economic Development Corporation (WHEDCO) was a mouthful of a name and a couple of women working with neighborhood parents. Our vision was to gain control of an empty shell of a former city hospital in the South Bronx and create a community economic development center, a bilingual public school and elegant apartments for formerly homeless and very low-income families. The Morrisania Hospital, abandoned for 20 years, was a remnant of an age when hospitals, like libraries and schools, were designed to symbolize the dignity and grandeur of the public realm. Even in its decrepit state – windowless, surrounded with razor wire and buffered by cinderblocks – the structure was stunning.

As part of the movement of community-based organizations working in the Bronx since the eighties to rebuild vast swaths of vacant buildings and land – the perennial backdrops for stories of urban blight – I was hardly a novice at housing development. Yet reincarnating this Italian Renaissance-style hospital was an altogether different experience – its restoration unlike any rehab I had done before. Built of steel and concrete, sheathed in blond brick, trimmed in stone and roofed in red Spanish tiles, the building exuded a stately grandeur. The finished building would become home to our flagship enterprise, the Urban Horizons Economic Development Center, not only housing tenants but also providing a range of services to a larger community of over 3,000 people each year.

If buildings can alter consciousness, this one altered mine. I pursued its “adaptive re-use” and interior design through the lens of my own middle-class standards. The meticulous restoration of its beauty, both inside and out, challenged and consumed me. My perspective on life in the big city has evolved over years of being a working mother raising three children, and has inevitably informed my work in community development. Living in urban settings, especially with children, is stressful and periods of calm and tranquility are tonics. City-dwellers with money can afford weekend escapes to restore mental and physical energy; others have only their homes as sanctuaries to recharge psychic batteries. Without any other release valves, the beauty and tranquility of home takes on great urgency for low-income families. Beauty is not a luxury.

During the design phase of Urban Horizons in 1995, under the watchful guidance of multiple government lenders, my judgments were repeatedly questioned. These were not questions that went to bottom-line costs but rather to aesthetic issues: How high were the ceilings? Why did we need to keep the arched windows? Or build solid oak kitchen cabinetry? Or install ceramic tile backsplashes or poured terrazzo floors? Why create pilasters to break up the monotony of long corridors? Why add sconces and wainscoting and chair rails and decorative chandeliers? I realized that I was making choices about finishes and window treatments as though my family were going to live in this building.

The height of apartment ceilings was our most contentious and revealing dispute. An engineering analysis found retaining the vaulted ceilings would not increase the heating costs as the officials feared – conversely, dropping the ceilings, as they insisted, would actually *increase* construction costs. Nonetheless, we were told in no uncertain terms that 12-foot ceilings did not “conform” to “the standards” for low-income housing. Whose standards? Certainly not mine. The building, although not officially designated a landmark, was eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places. Everything we did to the exterior had to pass review by the New York State Office of Historic Preservation. While high ceilings may not have “conformed” to the standards for low-income housing, the state preservation agency argued that dropping the ceilings would mean cutting off the tops of the windows, thereby changing the exterior appearance of the building. But our lenders would not budge, and so a compromise was struck. The ceilings in every apartment would retain their full 12-foot height near the windows then angle downwards to nine feet midway across each room. I feared that it would look ridiculous. To everyone’s surprise our architects created a ceiling slant that actually looked intentional, with a dramatic and loft-like look.

Each design decision I communicated to our architects reflected values that (I was reminded continually) were not universally shared. And so these details of interior and exterior spaces dissolved into small wars of attrition. We wore the government agencies down; they wore us down. At every impasse we provided cost-estimates. Our architects and subcontractors scurried to obtain bulk discounts on such items

as high quality oak cabinets; our property manager argued the “durability” and long- term maintenance side. Today, solid oak cabinets hang in the 132 apartments of Urban Horizons.

Kitchens – the symbolic hearth of homes – became battlegrounds for design-values conflict. We argued successfully for installing ceramic tile backsplashes in the kitchens, to keep moisture from seeping into the sheetrock behind sinks and kitchen counters. This was not solely a matter of maintenance or aesthetics, but also a health concern. Cockroaches, which breed in the kind of damp and dark spaces found in kitchens, are known contributors to asthma, which is epidemic in the Bronx. Frequently we found support from the affordable housing underwriters who understood the pay-now-or-pay-later issue at the root of many design debates. Over the long haul it is vastly more expensive to rip out soggy sheetrock in bathrooms or replace fiberglass tub/shower molds that can be punctured easily and cause massive leakage and damage to apartments below. As a result, the underwriters would out-flank the design “standards” folks on a number of disputed interior specifications.

Many people involved with the hospital’s restoration were inspired to go the extra mile. One of the subcontractors became so enamored of the building that he brought in an enormous chunk of marble, which he polished and installed for us as a reception desk at no extra cost. Suddenly four spindly pendant light fixtures looked completely inadequate for the stately lobby. I asked the contractors to replace them with more elegant fixtures that I purchased myself. I care about these chandeliers to this day, especially when I observe a tenant entering the lobby and gazing up.

With each design enhancement we sought, we learned that good design did not necessarily result in increased costs. A comparison of Urban Horizons’ construction costs with that of a public housing development built at the same time revealed that, despite significant differences in interior specifications – fiberglass tub/shower units in public housing instead of full ceramic tile walls and porcelain tubs at Urban Horizons; painted plywood kitchen cabinets instead of solid oak finished cabinetry;

sheetrock instead of ceramic tile backsplashes in kitchens, etc. – the costs were virtually identical. Depending on unit size, our costs ranged from \$46,500 for a studio, to \$108,000 for a three-bedroom, two-bath unit; the public housing apartments cost was \$100,000 per unit, with a two-bedroom average unit size.

Seven years after our apartments were fully rented, we asked the City University of New York Center for Human Environments to examine the impact of beautiful design on the lives of our tenants ([see sidebar](#)). There has been much study and commentary on the effects of bad living environments on families living in poverty, but little on the effects of beautifully designed affordable housing, probably because not enough of it has been built and examined after a significant number of years. The good news is that a “good design in affordable housing” movement is gaining momentum. Fueled in part by the need to combat the NIMBY phenomenon, affordable housing developers are coming to realize that low-income housing need not be ugly or even ordinary. So, why not make it beautiful, if for no other reason than gaining community acceptance?

The Guided Tours at Urban Horizons – Gabrielle Bendiner-Viani’s collaborative project with residents – is a first glimpse into the interiors of our tenants’ homes seven years after the building was rehabilitated for residential use. These photographs reveal how beautiful spaces seem to create a remarkable sense of peace and serenity. The residents take the beauty, make it their own and begin the process of building beautiful lives. Moreover, the photographs challenge the mythology that poor people “destroy” neighborhoods or housing. Over time these apartments remain beautiful and well tended. From a public policy perspective, the interiors of these apartments show that an investment in quality and the values of aesthetics is paying off. Because Urban Horizons housing is 100 percent tax-credit eligible/financed, we are required by law to “re-certify” basic information about the tenants each year. The Low Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC) program provides equity for the building of housing for families who earn no more than 60 percent of Area Median Income (AMI). When Urban Horizons opened in 1997 the income range in New York ran from \$13,200 for a single adult in a studio apartment to \$34,100 for a family of six or more in a three-bedroom apartment. (Under the LIHTC

program a household may never pay more than 30 percent of its income for rent; through the income re-certification process, rents are adjusted, upwards or downwards, annually).

Urban Horizons is not supportive housing. The occupants of our 132 apartments are rent-stabilized permanent tenants. They do not live in a "program," and we do not provide any special services for them other than typical maintenance and operations. These apartments are located in the same building that houses primary health, child care and other social services, as well as employment training, micro-enterprise and social ventures. However, the building was purposefully designed so that the Economic Development Center was physically distinct from the apartments, with separate entrances, elevators and mechanical systems. It was essential to our values in community development to not restrict these programs and services to the fortunate few who would reside on site.

Early data on how our tenants have fared since moving here is particularly noteworthy. Forty-eight of the 132 apartments were reserved for homeless families coming directly from the shelter system. The remaining families were at 60 percent of AMI. In 2003, 80 percent of the working families still live here and 83 percent of the formerly homeless families remain. Of the tenants who were unemployed and/or on public assistance, only 14 percent remain on welfare. Of those who were employed at initial occupancy, 88 percent remain so. Of those who became employed and left welfare, the average increase in income was \$23,000 – with wage gains varying from slightly less than \$10,000 to a high of \$50,000! Eighty percent of the tenants who were employed at initial occupancy experienced a \$9,108 average increase in household income. Of course the picture is not totally rosy: 20 percent of the employed tenants experienced an income drop averaging \$5,900.

These findings suggest that further study of Low Income Housing Tax Credit-financed housing may well yield some powerful information. Because tax credit financed housing is the only affordable housing that requires annual and nationally standardized IRS reporting on tenant income, this could be accessible territory for

scholars and affordable housing advocates to explore. It would be important to chart tenant data yearly against other economic indicators to see how well or poorly they related to each other.

An important part of the Urban Horizons rehab was the aggressive affirmative hiring provision that WHEDCO drafted for the construction contract. It required a community hiring coordinator who had a trailer on the construction site and reported to me. At the end of the \$16 million 17- month restoration, fully 80 percent of the workforce had come from the community.

More than eight years later, people walk by the building and tell our staff (and their friends) how they "built" the building or they walk by and just raise a fist in the air. Just a few months ago, on the same evening that Bronx By Design made its debut exhibit at the National Arts Club in Manhattan, I was walking to my car when a man who saw me gaze up at the building said, "I built that." I guess I reacted with surprise, because he proceeded to tell me something about the interior that only someone who was actually in there with the guts ripped out and rebuilt would have known. It was a very sweet moment. I felt, all at once, what internalizing beauty and ownership might mean. This sense of ownership is conferred by neither deed nor mortgage. Instead, I believe that it derives from the community's embrace of a building that was revived after years of neglect. Urban Horizons provides the Bronx community with beautiful housing, but also with a powerful and deeply cherished symbol of endurance and triumph.

Link: <https://shelterforce.org/2004/03/01/bronx-by-design-why-beauty-matters/>