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Affordable Housing That's So Nice to Come Home To:[FINAL Edition]

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Full Text (1131 words)

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Several powerful statements make quiet appearances at the beginning of a new exhibition at the National Building Museum.

Perhaps the most astounding one is this: In the whole of the United States there exists not a single county where a household with one wage earner making minimum wage can afford a modest one- bedroom apartment without outside assistance.

Not far behind, however is this: The nation would have to produce more than 250,000 affordable housing units a year for two decades running to close its "housing affordability gap."

These statistics and others taken from an authoritative, congressionally mandated study of America's housing provide a succinct, somewhat chilling context for "Affordable Housing: Designing an American Asset," the exhibition that opens today.

The focus of the exhibition is design. Specifically, it highlights 18 recently completed affordable housing developments from all parts of the union that are exemplary in architecture, urban design and sustainability.

Each of the projects is thoroughly documented with photographs, site plans and architectural drawings, and some include three-dimensional models. And to make comparisons between the displays more meaningful, each comes with a list detailing things such as project size, density, tenant income ranges (or in some cases, owner income levels), sponsoring organizations and funding sources.

As lagniappe, toward the end of the exhibition competition-winning designs are showcased from the innovative HOME House Project organized by the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art in Winston- Salem, N.C. Nearby, the remarkable transformation of the Village of Parklands, a once-derelict 100-acre housing compound in Southeast Washington, is celebrated.

Cumulatively, these displays pack a punch. They demonstrate a renewed commitment to social housing by a significant portion of the architectural profession, and they illustrate a new variety and sophistication in affordable housing design.

Probably the biggest change from the recent past is that almost all of these projects don't read as "projects." Segregation of "affordable" from "normal" housing was the rule for most of the large public housing projects built in the decades after World War II. A comment by Howard Decker, the museum's chief curator and formerly an architect in Chicago, summed it up: "It was as if there had been a giant neon sign hanging over the projects, saying, 'Poor People Live Here.' "

A witches' brew of mistakes compounded the problems of the large postwar housing complexes. Many suffered from cut-rate construction practices and inadequate maintenance budgets. Many also were victimized by a least-common-denominator form of modern architecture that was ill-adapted to the social needs of its tenants.

So, clearly, the architects and builders of today's affordable housing have lots to react against. And they've done so, as we see in this exhibition. Stylistic variety is now the norm, "fitting in" the design mantra, long-term maintenance the goal and mixing households of differing income levels the new strategy. And today's projects are much smaller--the largest of the 18 developments in this exhibition contains 411 units, while the majority hover in the 20- to 40-unit range.

All of this amounts to a dramatic change in attitude on the part of suppliers and designers of affordable housing. Much of the change was stimulated by the federal government, which in 1993 initiated the HOPE VI program (that's for Home Ownership and Opportunity for People Everywhere) to revitalize problem-filled public housing projects. But though the feds still play a big role, getting affordable housing built today is much more a matter of putting together complex public-private packages.

Perhaps the most important transformation, from a design point of view, is that these new housing projects give nothing away in terms of design quality. Whether the style is self-confidently modern or self-consciously traditional, nothing in this show would take a back seat to housing built for the private market.

Indeed, all of the housing on view appears to be exceptionally responsive to client needs. Doors and entryways are in the right places, for instance. Privacy is guaranteed, community needs are anticipated with shared indoor and outdoor spaces, natural light is exploited, and access for disabled or ill people is well thought out--the list could go on. A lot of new private housing, even at the upper end of the economic scale, would not pass muster on a similar list of qualitative checkoffs.

Do you prefer traditional design? Well, it would be hard to find an upscale project that is as artful and cheerfully traditional as architect Amy Weinstein's Townhomes on Capitol Hill, the locally well-known HOPE VI transformation of a site once occupied by a public housing project, the Ellen Wilson Dwellings.

Or does modern architecture strike your fancy? Here, too, there are outstanding examples. My favorite, perhaps, is the sunny, inventive 18-unit project on a Los Angeles hilltop designed by Koning Eizenberg Architects. This provides excellent accommodation for a very few of our most disadvantaged citizens. The clientele consists of disabled or very ill folks who somehow survive on 30 percent or less of regional median income. They live on, that is, \$15,000 or less per year.

Or do you believe that something in between is more appropriate? Kudos, then, go to the design of the Row 8.9n Townhomes in Nashville by Everton Oglesby Architects--loft-style rowhouses that embody the spirit of some of the best 1920s modern designs and yet look perfectly at home and thoroughly contemporary.

The only knock on this project is that it represents what's called a "shallow subsidy." Eleven of its 29 units will be offered to households earning about 80 percent of the regional median income (\$46,640). The rest will be sold at market rate. Yet it took the collaboration of the state, the city, two housing agencies, a nonprofit organization, a foundation, four banks and "a consortium of lenders" to put this modest project together.

Which brings us back to our cautionary beginning. Architectural style is not the main issue. The

exhibition is an upbeat signal that there is plenty of goodwill out there and lots of creativity among architects, builders, bureaucrats, philanthropies, financial institutions and the nonprofits.

Yet, according to "Meeting Our Nation's Housing Challenges," the 2002 report commissioned (but not yet acted upon) by Congress, "the nation faces a widening gap between the demand for affordable housing and the supply of it." While the supply is shrinking, the report says, demand is high--27.9 million U.S. households have housing affordability problems, and 11.3 million of these problems are characterized as "severe."

Simply put, we're not doing the job. That's not good and it's not right.

Affordable Housing: Designing an American Asset, guest-curated by Ralph Bennett and Isabelle Gournay of the University of Maryland, remains on view through Aug. 8 at the National Building Museum, 401 F St. NW, Monday-Saturday 10 a.m.-5 p.m. and Sunday 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Admission is free.

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