

February 2, 2009

LUXE AFFORDABILITY MARKS GREEN RENEWAL IN THE BRONX

A site where blight once reigned is becoming a haven for homeless and lower-income residents. > *By Chloe Tribich*



Intervale Green was completed in December. The developer expects all residents to move in this month. *Photos by Lisa Kahane*

Thirty-one years after President Jimmy Carter's tour of the devastated south Bronx sparked a flurry of media attention and interest in revitalization efforts, one local nonprofit is looking to redefine the goals of affordable development.

In the same area where President Carter once stood to survey the almost otherworldly rubble and decay, on Intervale Avenue near Freeman Street a new 128-unit development offers low-income residents not only the comfort of a home, but accoutrements such as eco-friendly design, a sculpture garden, decorative lighting, and a free computer with wireless Internet access for each unit.

Called Intervale Green, the new complex was completed in December by the Women's Housing and Economic Development Corporation (WHEDCo) for people either leaving the homeless shelter system, or with family incomes between \$28,934 and \$53,460. The group expects 400 residents to move in by the end of this month. "We wanted to show it's achievable," said WHEDCo founder and president Nancy Biberman of the building's blend of affordability, technology, aesthetics and green design.

Biberman points to academic studies demonstrating that the characteristics of impoverished neighborhoods – like dirty streets and poorly kept housing – intensify stress and depression. “It’s not a revelation that the beauty of your home has an effect on you,” she said.

The \$39 million development – the largest affordable development in the country to received the federal Energy Star designation for energy efficiency – was funded by a combination of Low Income Housing Tax Credits, financing from the NYSERDA Multifamily Program Pilot and other green development programs, along with city capital funding. The building features green roofs, triple-paned windows and a rooftop boiler. Efficient appliances are expected to save residents – one-third of whom will move directly from homeless shelters – up to 30 percent on energy bills.



A view of Wilkins Avenue in 1984, a stone's throw from the new development.

Photo reprinted courtesy Lisa Kahane, from her book, "Do Not Give Way to Evil: Photographs of the South Bronx, 1979-1987," powerHouse Books, 2008.

Intervale Green joins a growing list of energy-conscious affordable developments in the Bronx. 1212 MLK Apartments, a 54-unit development in Highbridge completed by Beulah HDFC and Dunn Development Corporation in 2006, was the nation’s first multifamily property to qualify for the Energy Star label. Other developments in the borough, such as Melrose Commons II – which consists of 30 three-family homes – have been noted for green features. Still other multifamily properties have been retrofitted for energy efficiency through various government programs. **Intervale Green**, however, may be the first to combine high environmental standards with artistic design.

WHEDCo obtained donations of high-end tile for the building’s public areas, and the apartments contain sconces, pendant lighting and ceramic tile kitchen backsplashes. Courtyards and a red brick façade reflect elements of typical Bronx tenement buildings.

Bronx artist Matthew Burcaw’s wall-mounted installation “Traffic,” depicting a jumble of brightly colored cars, adorns the main lobby, and the sculpture garden showcases a twisted steel configuration, “Transformations,” by Linda Cunningham.

“I spent a year in Germany and I saw that as a place of enormous change away from a hideous history; when I moved to the Bronx [in 2000] I saw a similar process, but around totally different issues,” Cunningham explained.

Much has changed since President Carter toured the vacant lots on Charlotte Street in October 1977. By that time, the Morrisania/East Crotona neighborhood of the Bronx had been suffering from a heroin epidemic and systemic property neglect for nearly two decades.

“There were blocks and blocks of vacant buildings, crowds of homeless men, abandoned cars and dogs,” says Mark Naison, a professor of history and African American studies at Fordham University who has worked in the Bronx for 38 years. “There was one building we called ‘little house on the prairie’ because there was nothing standing within a few hundred feet.”

Carter’s visit seized media and government attention. In the early 1980s the well-funded South Bronx Development Corporation, led by controversial urban renewal figurehead Edward Logue, developed Charlotte Gardens, which sparked local criticism for its suburban design. Further south, Banana Kelly Community Improvement Association designed its first building in 1979.

“We had double paned windows, heavy insulation and solar panels on the roof,” said Harry DiRienzo, a founder of Banana Kelly and former president of the Parodneck Foundation. “Back then I thought energy efficiency was the wave of the future. It’s taken a long time, but today I believe that what Nancy [Biberman] has put together – from an environmental perspective and from other perspectives – really will be the future.”



The view from the roof of Intervale Green surveys a changed neighborhood.

Today, for all the real progress, the area’s turnaround is far from complete. According to the latest statistics from the Furman Center for Real Estate at NYU, more than two in five of the community district’s residents live in poverty, the highest proportion in the five boroughs. The area counts over 40 felonies per 1,000 residents, seventh out of the city’s 54 community districts.

Partly for that reason, Biberman wants Intervale Gardens to be a source of pride for all neighborhood residents, not only the complex’s tenants. “Young kids in third or fourth grade know that people react in a negative way when you say you live in the Bronx, but they don’t know why,” she said. “They internalize these things. It becomes ‘I’m bad.’”

With the broader community in mind, WHEDCo planted 40 new street trees and constructed a public garden with benches. “We hope it’ll permeate people’s lives in different ways, as a little spark that gets

people thinking and imagining,” she said.

Isadee Gomez, 26, heads one of the households that will soon move into Intervale Green. After eight months in a shelter with her four children, ages 6, 4, 2 and 6 months, she is ecstatic. “It’s beautiful,” Gomez gushed. “The first time I saw it, I thought, ‘I need a pinch to wake up.’”

Gomez appreciates the aesthetic aspects of her new building, but she is most grateful for the basic services. “I like the security,” she said, referring to a guard who will watch over the entrance. “It makes you feel safe. And the apartments are spacious. The whole thing welcomes you like home.”

Fordham professor Naison thinks WHEDCo’s approach to development – one that incorporates an understanding of the full spectrum of human needs, including providing some middle-class amenities to lower-income tenants – is crucial. “When people talk to me about all the new housing, they always ask, ‘but where will the kids play?’ ... WHEDCo is filling a very sharp need in this community. I’m hoping that other organizations will follow suit.”