

TIME

GOING GREEN

Building Green Houses for the Poor

By [BRYAN WALSH](#) Tuesday, Feb. 17, 2009



Intervale Green, an environmentally friendly housing development for low income families in the Bronx, New York.
Whedco

When most people hear the term "green building," they probably imagine something like Bank of America's (BoA) soon-to-be-completed Midtown Manhattan headquarters. The skyscraper will have floor-to-ceiling insulating glass walls, automatic light dimming, water recycling, air filtration and on-site power generation. Those green features have helped make the BoA Tower the first skyscraper to win a Platinum Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) rating, the highest possible such award. They also helped ensure that the tower won't be cheap — the project is estimated to cost about \$1 billion. ([Read "Building Materials: Cementing the Future."](#))

The high-tech green features of the BoA Tower certainly look impressive from the outside, but the real guts of green design can be seen farther uptown, in the economically depressed South Bronx. There, the Women's Housing and Economic Development Corporation (WHEDCo) — a veteran New York nonprofit — has just opened the Intervale Green housing development, a 128-unit apartment building for low-income families. ([Watch the video of The Next Big Biofuel.](#))

Intervale Green doesn't have the glass walls, waterless urinals or ice batteries that the BoA Tower boasts. No one would describe Intervale as cutting edge, but it is green where it counts — with more energy efficient appliances, better window insulation and energy efficient fluorescent lights, all of which will enable its low-income residents to save real money on their utility bills. "Residents will be

paying 30% less for their utilities than in an ordinary building," says Nancy Biberman founder and president of WHEDCo, during a recent tour of Intervale. "For them, going green is a survivability issue. It's important for the environment, but it's really important for their pocketbooks." ([See "The Top 10 Green Stories of 2008".](#))

Intervale is one of a number of new and planned green, low-income housing projects around the country — an enterprise for which the [federal stimulus package](#) will include increased funding (it will also provide money for improving the energy efficiency of existing homes). In Miami, the nonprofit Carrfour Supportive Housing is building the 145-unit Verde Gardens Apartment building; the project will use green modular wall systems and aim for LEED certification. In Chicago, the Resurrection Homes project offers affordable green housing, and the soon to be completed Victory Centre will include green apartments for low-income seniors. And nationwide, the nonprofit Enterprise Communities Partners has helped create or preserve more than 320 inexpensive green housing developments, from Portland to Jacksonville. The building momentum shows that you don't have to be rich to go green — which is often accused of being an elitist concern. "There's no reason why we shouldn't be building everything green," says Dana Bourland, senior director for Enterprise's Green Communities Program. "If you can do this in affordable housing, there's no excuse not to do it everywhere." ([Read "What Is a Green-Collar Job, Exactly?"](#))

That's a lesson you can take from Intervale Green. The neighborhood was once a symbol of total urban decay — President Jimmy Carter made a famous visit to the South Bronx in 1978 when it resembled a bombed-out war zone. Life has improved considerably since, but the \$39 million Intervale development still looks a bit out of place on its street. As Biberman leads a tour through freshly painted hallways, she points to the artistic tile work in the floors — sold by a New Jersey company looking to recycle leftover tiles — as well as the compact fluorescent bulbs that illuminate the building's lobby. Green, she says, is more than just a matter of energy efficiency — it also means livability and creating a better community for the families moving into Intervale, 30% of whom will be coming from homeless shelters. "It can mean beauty too," she says, pointing to a garden installation created by a Bronx artist using, of course, recycled materials. Intervale also has a roof garden — atypical in the Bronx — that's visible from the street. "The idea is to bring green into people's lives." ([See TIME's photoessay "Fragile Planet".](#))

But Intervale — like other energy-efficient housing developments — will also bring green into residents' checkbooks. Each of the units has Energy Star-rated refrigerators and appliances, triple-paned windows to cut heat loss and smart thermostats. Those features help make Intervale the largest affordable Energy Star-certified building in the country. And energy efficiency can be a surprisingly

effective economic stimulus in the middle of a downturn. According to the Department of Housing and Urban Development, low-income families spend some 17% of their income on utilities — a far bigger proportion than spent by the better off. "In this economy there are few levers you can pull for people," says Biberman. "You can't do jobs, and you can't lower rents much more. But utility savings are something — it's a chunk of change that can add up."

That's one of the reasons why the Obama Administration has been pushing hard to include funds for green building and for weatherizing existing homes as part of its economic stimulus package. Wherever the funding comes from ultimately, there's little doubt that lower-income developments will continue to go greener, which will do more good for residents, and for the planet. "This is going to make a real tangible difference," says Jennifer Henry, the real estate sector manager for the Natural Resource Defense Council's Center for Market Innovation.

For Isadee Gomez, who is moving into Intervale with her four children, the project has already made a tangible difference in her life. She's moving out of a homeless shelter, and Intervale — quiet, safe and green — is more than she could have hoped for. "I just took a look at our apartment and it's gorgeous," she says. "I wanted to cry. Everything is perfect."