

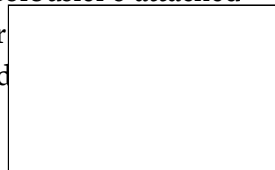
Architects in South Florida developing affordable housing models



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The news out of Miami is usually spectacle and the glimmer of new hotels or high-rises, mixed with occasional doses of sea-level angst. But rarely is there much sizzle around social housing or the reimagining of public space. According to the Center for Housing Policy in Washington, some of the city's poorest citizens spend more than 60 percent of their income on monthly rent. With one of the most expensive real-estate markets in the country, Miami is suffering from a major workforce housing crisis.

In Europe, it was once the defining challenge for a modernist architect to design innovative housing for the poor and working class. Think of J.P. Oud's streamlined housing block in the *Hoek van Holland* (1920); Le Corbusier's attached housing at Pessac (1924); the Bauhaus dormitory by Walter Gropius in Dessau, Germany (1926); or *Onkel Toms Hütte* housing in Berlin (1929). These were all beautiful and successful projects, consid



landmarks on a par with the single-family houses and cultural institutions that made these same arc Still in Europe today, there's an ongoing tradition of young architects designing state-sponsored soci way to not only launch their own practices but begin to engage in the social contract of public archit

In Miami, big-name modernists with names like Koolhaas, Piano, Foster, Hadid and Herzog parachu to design luxury condominium towers, retail centers, upscale parking garages and the occasional mu the first to cheer such an influx and encourage the heightened level of urban stimulation that it bring think that a little of this same gilded genius could trickle down, somehow, to the humble masses — professors, nurses, journalists, policemen, firemen, retail merchants, construction workers, waitresse low-income and homeless. All are deserving of affordable and decently designed housing.

Certainly, with so much tax revenue streaming in from foreign investment, there should be a tangib between luxe and social housing. Back in Britain's Labour Party days, there was a law in London tha built over a certain height, private developers were required to pay an extra tax that went toward lov in another part of the city. It maintained a kind of spatial balance — however symbolic it may have b rich and poor.

And yes, Design with a capital "D" makes a difference and should never be thought of as an extrava afforded only by the richest clients. Smart design practice can help maximize available space, bring costs and boost security while creating a sense of spatial clarity, personal pride, safety and communi shouldn't publicly sponsored housing be as thoughtfully design as a luxury condo or private home?

Resume

In Broward County, there's a shining example of public and private initiative banding together to create a housing model that combines human dignity with good design and sustainable urbanism. Architect Margi Nothard of Glavovic Studio worked closely with Tam English and Scott Strawbridge of the Housing Authority of the City of Fort Lauderdale (HACFL), who are the official owners of the development known as Kennedy Homes.

"They allowed me to ride the design train," said Nothard, who also credits the city for taking a progressive approach, as did the developers — Carlisle Development in the beginning and, later, AP Communities (Atlantic Pacific Communities). "We tried to avoid the cookie cutter syndrome," said Strawbridge, director of facilities at the HACFL, a housing authority that has actively sought the participation of experienced architects like Nothard. "Good design is always worth it, and it doesn't have to be expensive."

Using fairly simple and economical moves, the architect, housing authority and developer turned what otherwise might have been another mediocre housing project into a truly sustainable community with dynamic architecture and open, flowing spaces that reach out into adjacent neighborhoods.

Buildings were given a sense of movement and texture with variegated blocks of pale colors, open courtyards and natural ventilation to save on air-conditioning costs, with cantilevered balconies, boxed-out window frames, entry canopies, breezeways and setbacks for depth and shade.

"I wanted to create a strong urban edge," said Nothard, who positioned two five-story blocks along Broward Boulevard, the east-west axis that runs from Interstate 95 to downtown Fort Lauderdale. The higher buildings help to block out noise and provide a protective buffer against the busy seven-lane boulevard. From there, the rest of the complex (132 units in all), tapers off to the south with smaller two- and three-story pinwheel-shaped clusters that feel almost bucolic in comparison to the taller buildings.

Density was a key consideration. While there was enough acreage for 220 units, the team decided to build only 132 units and leave as much open space as possible.

They requested, and were finally granted, a 40 percent reduction in parking requirements from the city to allow more design flexibility and less cost. Nothard made the case that the parking quota would create a “heat island,” increasing the amount of asphalt on the site and reducing green space throughout the complex.

About 53 percent of the 8.5-acre property was left open and has been landscaped with rolling berms, native oaks, palm trees and exotic shrubs. (As many as 90 pre-existing trees were preserved.) “We located the buildings to accommodate the trees,” explained Nothard. Modular building elements were interspersed with children’s playgrounds, winding pathways, breezeways, shaded courtyards and a community events center. All meld seamlessly into the low-rise historic neighborhood that lies immediately south of the complex.

“We really approached it as an urban redevelopment project and tried to design in a sense of connectivity with the surrounding community,” said Nothard. There are no restricting walls or fences, though every entry plaza is protected by its own security gate and video surveillance system. Access to each unit is either through an open courtyard or, in the higher blocks, raised walkways around the perimeter instead of a central, hotel-like corridor.

Somehow, the \$16 million project came in at less than \$100 a square foot — a price almost impossible to comprehend in today’s market, especially when compared with the glossy new developments being built in Miami Beach for more than \$2,000 a square foot. Monthly rents range from about \$350 for a studio and go up to \$1,100 for a three-bedroom apartment.

“I don’t think that the solutions need to be expensive,” said Nothard. “It’s more about solving problems in the most poetic way possible.”

At first, there was a predictable amount of not-in-my-backyard opposition from nearby residents, but once they saw the level of quality and care that went into the design of the complex, they were relieved, even delighted, with the results. Some neighbors make regular use of the community rooms.

If one didn’t know otherwise, a passerby might mistake the complex for a more expensive installation. After it was finished, Nothard’s office got calls from several more affluent individuals who wanted to move in. “We had to explain that they made too much money to qualify,” she said. Residents have to make less than the Broward County average income, about \$50,000 for a family.

The lessons of Kennedy Homes could become a model for other affordable housing projects in Miami and surrounding municipalities. “I believe that good design makes you think,” Nothard said. “It’s another effective tool for the urban planner.” She and Glavovic Studio have just completed work on another affordable housing project called Sailboat Bend, this one for seniors.

Again in tandem with HACFL and Atlantic Pacific Communities, Nothard and her design team worked with the seven-story framework of a pre-existing 50-year-old building located between the Fourth Avenue Bridge and River Walk in downtown Fort Lauderdale. They gutted the interior, brought it up to code, inserted 105 new units (with one or two bedrooms), and redressed the exterior with a shimmering curtain wall of vertical glass panels in varying shades of blue, gray and yellow that makes for a handsome facade of patterned reflectivity.

Balconies were tucked discretely behind glass columns and aluminum railings. Some of the windows have been “fritted” with vertical bands of a pale ceramic application that not only reduces glare and solar heat gain but also does away with the need for curtains.

Based on a 20-inch module, the linear pattern extends from the facade down to a terrace with alternating black-and-white pavers below. “The pattern also helps create a connection to the river,” said Nothard, who admits to having been inspired by the natural lines of the surrounding landscape and thinks of the project as a kind of abstract

landscape. There will also be a community garden on the property, as well as a shaded plaza that links to Riverwalk Park.

The Sailboat Bend renovation project came in at a most reasonable budget of \$8 million, this for 105 units at about \$100 per square foot. “I believe that an architect can make a real difference in this kind of project,” said Nothard. “Our goal was to create an artful, exceptional living environment with walkable, sustainable and connected spaces.” The Sailboat Bend senior community is scheduled to open later this month.

Other innovative projects in the works deserve mention. “It’s all about scale and flexibility,” said architect Jason Chandler of Chandler & Associates, who is also chair of the Architecture Department at FIU. He has designed a series of prototypes for affordable infill housing, and the first two examples are being built on a 50-foot-by-100-foot lot in Little Havana (on Northwest Second Street between the river and West Flagler). When complete, each 25-foot-wide building will have 4,500 square feet broken up into four units, at an approximate cost of \$135 per square foot. The design calls for simple boxy volumes made from concrete block, three-stories tall, with inset balconies and a vertical garden or green wall on the street facades that features tropical air plants growing out of a stainless steel mesh. This permeable garden creates shade and allows breezes to pass through the apartments. The narrow townhouse concept evolved from a series of student workshops that Chandler conducted on small-scale housing with particular attention given to the historic brownstone houses of Savannah, Georgia.

“If you empower small property owners to make investments in their own neighborhood, you’ll get incremental revitalization,” said developer Andrew Frey, who is working with Chandler and believes that low-income infill housing is a logical answer to Miami’s housing crisis. Frey says one of the drawbacks to building better affordable housing is that the Miami 21 Code requires 1.5 parking spaces per unit. “This kind of zoning requirement incentivizes gentrification and makes affordable housing almost impossible,” Frey said. “It limits development to big pieces of land and large financial resources.” He and Chandler have been lobbying the city to allow exemptions for small-scale developments such as their Little Havana project, and the city’s building department is reviewing the proposal. Their long-term goal is to create a workable prototype for small-scale infill housing that can be replicated in other Miami neighborhoods while setting a pattern of ownership and entrepreneurship that extends throughout the city.

The Pinnacle Housing Group is building mixed-income housing at their Tarpon River site on the southern edge of Fort Lauderdale. It will be a 10-story complex with 112 units that mixes market-rate townhouses with affordable apartments in the \$720-per-month range. The Tarpon River complex is scheduled to open this summer.

A proposed Liberty Square project in Miami is also supposed to be mixed-income, but plans and a price range have not been announced by the city yet. Another mixed-income plan is being developed by architect William Arthur for a lot in Wynwood that will support two multi-family buildings designed to reflect the casual, low-rise character of the neighborhood. Each floor will have four small studios in the affordable range and one larger, market-rate apartment with two bedrooms and its own external entrance. The architecture features cantilevered sunscreens and full cross-ventilation in all apartments to reduce the need for air conditioning. All units share a central courtyard that will be planted with wild grasses and palm trees. Arthur and his development partner anticipate a cost of \$100 per square foot.

Alastair Gordon is an award-winning critic and author who has written about the built environment for the Wall Street Journal and The New York Times. His books include ‘Weekend Utopia’ and ‘Naked Airport.’ He writes regularly for the Miami Herald and is a Distinguished Fellow at the FIU College of Architecture + The Arts.

