



New housing for New York, viva verde!

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On June 18, mayor Bloomberg opened a revolutionary new residential building incorporating several features that contribute to a healthy, sustainable city, among other hallmarks of his legacy.

There has been a need for new housing in New York for longer than anyone can remember. New housing that New Yorkers can afford has often seemed to be an unrealizable dream. With an increasing population, finding a decent place to live in our city has been compared to winning the lottery.

The odds get slightly better, with the opening of a remarkable mixed-income development called Via Verde (Green Way) on Brook Ave. in the Bronx, not far from the vibrant commercial and transit center known as The Hub.

President Obama's Secretary of Housing & Urban Development, Shaun Donovan, will be back in New York for the ribbon-cutting. He was head of the city's housing agency, the Department of Housing Preservation and Development, when the project was initiated, challenging the design team "to create an exemplary model that would not just put in place the best standards of design being used elsewhere, but could actually create new standards for design going forward."

With the city's population pushing well past eight million, why does the creation of 228 new apartments matter? Early in the Bloomberg administration, the call was for 160,000 new affordable units to be either newly constructed or held back from conversion into luxury dwellings.

The idea of the New Housing New York Legacy competition that led to the new construction was that of a replicable model of "green" and healthy housing that could be afforded by the teachers, nurses, firefighters and others working in New York who could not afford Manhattan prices - in whichever borough the scant supply of available housing might be found.

The design-build competition was initiated and organized by the New York Chapter of the American Institute of Architects, so, not surprisingly, design came first. Thirty-two firms from around the world responded in the first phase of the competition. Two extraordinary architectural firms, Dattner Architects and Grimshaw, combined to win the contest, from a field of five finalists. They joined with Jonathan Rose Companies and Phipps Houses to get it built.

It was important that the new housing, if it was to become a model for other developments around the city, be well-designed, comfortable and set new standards of how housing can create opportunities for a healthier way of life.

The complex, one of the first to follow the recently published NYC Active Design Guidelines, has vegetable gardens on the roof, play space and a fitness center, along with a clinic run by Montefiore Hospital. The apartments are organized around a spacious central courtyard, drawing people out to a place animated by activity, flowering trees, visible stairways and a small amphitheater.

The guidelines called for more physical activity, so stair use is encouraged by making the stairways attractive and easy to find. Windows in the stairways, and bright colors, make the stairs more

welcoming. Posters encouraging stair use are located near the elevator buttons. Stairs also head up from the courtyard to the terraced gardens, culminating in the health club level where another design might have put a penthouse apartment. With great views of the neighborhood and the skyline, working out might be more fun here than any other gym in the city.

Solar panels and other common sense environmental features such as ceiling fans also set a new standard for lowering energy use in government-sponsored affordable housing. The apartments benefit from cross-ventilation, so that air conditioning use will be less necessary, even on the hottest days and nights.

For those who have seen the cycle of disinvestment and destruction in the South Bronx, the building of housing on what had been an overgrown, polluted and seemingly unbuildable site seems almost miraculous. Turning the rubble-strewn lot into the Via Verde, shows that a "green way" exists not only when market forces align, but when there is a spirit of design creativity joined to community demand.

In a recent keynote speech in Washington, D.C., at the annual convention of the American Institute of Architects, Mr. Donovan said Via Verde had shown the way for new housing developments across the country.

As government officials join with community residents and housing activists to celebrate Via Verde's opening and people moving in to the new apartments, the important takeaway may be that the creation of beautiful, healthy and affordable housing is possible if enough people say that it is a priority for our city, and for those empowered by voters, residents and designers to shape it. Viva verde!

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