



More Than Shelter

Protection from the elements is no longer the only goal for low-income housing. The needs of diverse communities must be met.

Architecture alone can't solve the country's social ills. But it can play a role in reducing the social stigmas linked to housing for low-income and homeless people, some of whom have special needs.

The complexity of issues that must be confronted and resolved before even the smallest project can be built often overshadows a basic component of successful housing: design. Low budgets, neighborhood opposition, and public policy regulations are used as excuses for uninspired architecture, but these factors can be catalysts for inventive design strategies.

Architects, urban designers, and social critics argue that it is inappropriate to "experiment" with housing for impoverished populations. But intelligent planning and formal ingenuity are not frivolous expenditures—they can be the foundation of a better place to live. While there is a dearth of architectural exploration in housing projects, some practitioners are raising the ante,

bringing their problem-solving skills and design vision to the housing arena. In the projects that follow, many of which incorporate on-site social services, architecture is used to diminish the marginalization of residents and to surpass the usually low expectations of a poor community.

As of 1993, the number of units for low-income renters in the U.S. stood 4.75 million short of the need, according to the Community Information Exchange's Housing for People with Special Needs (for more information, contact Community Information Exchange, 1029 Vermont Avenue, N.W., Suite 710, Washington, D.C. 20005-3517). And funds for housing projects are increasingly limited. All of the projects shown in this article benefit from some government funding, but current deficit-reducing measures are placing the onus on nonprofit housing developers to cobble together financing from myriad organizations, further complicating their mission.

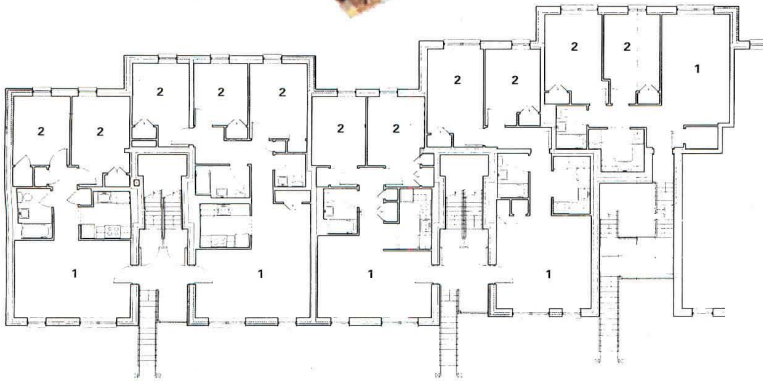
In light of such difficulties, it is all the more encouraging to see a movement afoot, modest as it may be, to provide more than shelter for society's underdogs.—*Abby Bussel*

ABOVE: Public housing in New York City by Becker & Becker Associates is arranged around a courtyard.

Learning from "The Projects"

This 56-unit public housing project for low-income families on New York's Lower East Side was conceived as a prototype, with issues of security, maintenance, and design given the highest priority. The project, by Becker & Becker Associates of New Canaan, Connecticut, attempts to both strengthen the urban fabric and provide a secure, human-scaled environment for residents on nearly a full city block.

The units are contained in two rows of four-story townhouses, which are connected by covered staircases and are located on the north and south sides of the block. The central building of each row has a monumental gated archway leading to a landscaped courtyard with a community house at one end. Load-bearing brick cavity walls with soldier courses and glazed brick details are designed to reflect the architectural vocabulary of the neighborhood. Scheduled for completion this spring, the housing may be the last of its kind—for a while. HUD, the main funding source of the project, along with the NYC Housing Authority, is facing deep budget cuts and, according to Principal Bruce Becker, has shifted its focus to the rehabilitation of existing housing.



SECOND FLOOR PLAN

- 1 LIVING/DINING ROOM
- 2 BEDROOM



NEW YORK CITY PUBLIC HOUSING BY BECKER & BECKER ASSOCIATES