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SPECIAL REPORT: AFFORDABLE HOUSING

By Rachel Zoberman

Sharper imager

DEVELOPERS PUT A NEW FACE ON AFFORDABLE HOUSING

Large wooden decks and balconies, vast open green space, skylights in the hallways, carefully selected exterior and interior finishes—such details and features are not what you would expect to find in an affordable housing community.

But developers and architects across the country are proving that, with a little thought and creativity, affordable housing communities can offer the same appeal as any market-rate development.

“We’re creating viable neighborhoods where people can find their identities and have a sense of pride about where they live,” says Tom Gallas, executive vice president of Torti Gallas and Partners, a Silver Spring, Md.-based architecture firm.

Operating under much tighter budgets than market-rate projects, affordable housing design teams must rely on innovative uses of standard materials, such as varying paint colors and siding widths, and creative designs that allow plenty of natural light in the homes and open green space in the community. Careful attention to surrounding architecture ensures that the new communities will blend in with the fabric of the existing neighborhood.

The following 10 developments show how developers and architects defy the old stereotypes of affordable housing, transforming blighted neighborhoods into safe, decently-priced, and eye-catching communities that residents are proud to call home.

Orlando Magic

Mixed-use Project Revitalizes Downtown Orlando

About 15 miles from Disney World sits one of the poorest areas in downtown Orlando, Fla. For the past few years, Orlando Neighborhood Improvement Corp. has provided this area with a small number of desperately needed affordable housing units, and the developer jumped at the chance to develop a large mixed-use project.

Acquiring the land took a bit of fancy footwork. About two-thirds of the land was acquired in a land swap, while two other parcels were purchased outright. The final parcel, a Masonic Lodge, was acquired in exchange for a new Lodge the company is building nearby.

The community, which offers 66 mixed-income units and 24,000 square feet of retail space, has already helped boost investment confidence in the area and adds a bright spot to an otherwise blighted neighborhood. "We were trying to basically break the psychological barrier



to this neighborhood as being a full member of downtown," says Bob Ansley, the development group's president.

Varying paint colors make the building

look more like a series of rowhouses than a large monolithic structure. Historic commercial and residential buildings once found in West Orlando inspired the building's design.

To keep costs down, the developer came up with an innovative way to handle storm water, which typically requires building a giant concrete structure under the building to hold the water. "That's very expensive, and you have to maintain it all the time," Ansley says. Storm water drainage will be handled off site at a nearby park being built by the city. A large drainage pond there will reduce the costs of building an underground structure and provide a water feature to residents.

City View

Location: Orlando, Fla.; **Developer:** Orlando Neighborhood Improvement Corp. and Bank of America Community Development Corp.; **Architect:** Fugleberg Koch Architects Inc.; **Opened:** November 2003; **Units:** 266 rental units plus commercial space; **Percent affordable:** 40 percent; **Rent guidelines:** 40 percent of units are reserved for residents at or below 60 percent of AMI; the rest are reserved for workforce and market-rate housing; **Total development cost:** \$38 million; **Notable:** City View was first planned as a three- or four-story building with a small amount of retail space and surface parking. But at the city's request, the developer made room for the national headquarters of Hughes Supply Inc., a 200,000-square-foot office building planned for a site across the street. The end result: The eight-story City View spans an entire block and includes a 1,020-car parking garage.

City View, which blends historic designs with contemporary architecture, brings renewed investment confidence to a deteriorating downtown district.

