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A new model in low-income housing

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Public housing used to mean fortress-like blocks and soulless rows of cheaply built townhouses. But now there's a new model: privately developed homes and apartments that are well-designed, well-built and attractive enough to win over wary neighbors. A growing number of architects, from established stars to ambitious up-and-comers, are looking to such projects as an opportunity to do innovative work.

A single-room-occupancy building that opened in Chicago last year was designed by Helmut Jahn, internationally known for his glass-sheathed skyscrapers; the 96-unit SRO, where most residents pay less than \$160 a month in rent, resembles a train, with its long, narrow shape, curved roof and glass-and-steel exterior. In Brooklyn's East New York neighborhood, a group of young architects teamed up to build nine two-family homes for families with modest incomes. Completed in March, the homes feature unconventional materials such as corrugated aluminum and unpainted cedar siding. And in Santa Monica, Calif., a recently completed 41-unit apartment building, designed by Pugh + Scarpa Architects, incorporates green design elements. It is partially clad in blocks made of recycled crushed aluminum cans and has a sail-shaped metal screen that helps shield the building from the sun.

Groundbreaking architecture still makes up a relatively small percentage of the thousands of units of low- and moderate-income housing that are built in the U.S. each year. Most of the design is "competent," says James Stockard, curator of the Loeb Fellowship at the Harvard School of Design and an expert in the field. Even that, however, is progress. Until the 1980s, almost all low-income housing

in the country was built by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, designed with an eye to quantity, not quality.

Today, most affordable housing is built by private developers or local agencies, with a mix of public and private funding; many projects receive government subsidies to keep rents or purchase prices lower than market rates. The shift is due in large part to reduced federal funding: HUD's \$36 billion budget in 2007 is a fraction of what the agency received in 1978 -- \$123 billion in today's dollars.

The interest in design comes as affordable housing is increasingly being mixed in among middle class and even luxury homes. And as costs have soared in many urban neighborhoods, more communities have adopted "inclusionary zoning" ordinances that require developers to set aside units for families of modest means.

The biggest developers in the field -- such as Denver-based Mercy Housing, which breaks ground on between 1,500 and 3,000 units of affordable housing a year -- stress thoughtful design in their projects. So do many public-housing agencies, which are increasingly turning to design competitions when selecting architects.

Until last year, Jeff Page, 42 years old, was living in a rescue mission in Los Angeles. He says he'd had a couple of opportunities to move into subsidized apartments, but turned them down, calling them "old and decrepit." Then a new building opened up on San Pedro Street: Rainbow Apartments, developed by the nonprofit Skid Row Housing Trust in downtown L.A. With its sharp angles and bright red window frames that jut out from the otherwise flat, concrete exterior, the 89-unit building stands out from traditional apartment buildings in the area.

The slashes of color, in particular, made an impression on Page, who moved into the building last year. "Skid Row is so dim and dismal," he says. "The bright color, it kind of wakes up my soul to the point that it makes me excited to come home, rather than hang out on the street."

Michael Alvidrez, executive director of the housing trust, says that was the sort of reaction the organization was hoping for when it hired

architect Michael Maltzan to take on the project. "Good design actually has therapeutic value," Alvidrez says. For his part, Maltzan says the chance to do interesting, creative work may now be more common on affordable-housing projects than market-rate ones. Nonprofit developers, he says, are "constitutionally wired for innovation."

Green design elements are also being incorporated into affordable housing, where advocates say it's most needed. Efficient buildings can save residents 25 percent or more on their heating bills and natural materials are less likely to give off fumes that can trigger asthma, a common problem in many inner-city neighborhoods.

"I believe issues of sustainability are more important in the affordable-housing field than in the luxury field," Stockard says. Big builders are embracing that philosophy, too. Enterprise, one of the largest financial backers of affordable-housing projects nationwide, promotes sustainable building through its Green Communities Initiative; launched in 2004, the program helps developers pay for features such as solar panels and rainwater capture systems.

Architecture is also being used as a wedge against NIMBYism. Marcus Johnson, a public-relations professional and a lifelong resident of Oakland, Calif., was initially opposed to a low-income housing complex being planned for his West Oakland neighborhood five years ago. Johnson, 54, went so far as to speak out against the project, proposed by San Francisco-based nonprofit Bridge Housing, at community meetings. "I was really skeptical," he says. "It was going to be a hangout for drug dealing."

But after seeing renderings of the building -- a geometric, modernist structure with a charcoal-colored exterior -- Johnson began to change his mind. Rather than looking like the drab public housing he expected, the building was sleek and contemporary, and enhanced the already improving area. "It sort of represents what the future of the neighborhood is starting to look like," Johnson says. After the building opened in 2004, Johnson returned to a meeting of the West Oakland Project Area Committee -- a local planning agency -- to

applaud the developers. "It's actually transformed that particular area," he says.

Unconventional approaches won't work everywhere, however. Bridge Chief Executive Carol Galante recalls an architect who proposed a "hip" modern building for Irvine, Calif., where many of the homes featured stucco and red tile roofs. "We just said no," Galante says. "It needed to fit in with the neighborhood."

Here's a look at a few of the projects that are changing the landscape of affordable housing:

Schiff residences, Chicago

Ninety-six-unit single-room occupancy building for very-low- income residents in the Near North neighborhood, completed in 2007.

Nonprofit Mercy Housing developed this building within blocks of what remains of Chicago's troubled Cabrini-Green public-housing projects.

Richard Banks, Mercy's president, says the organization wanted its new building to be "a statement that affordable housing doesn't have to be ugly or look like a warehouse." They hired Helmut Jahn, an acclaimed architect who designed a sleek, thin building with a glass-and-steel exterior and clean modern interior. The building also includes energy-saving green elements, such as solar panels and a rooftop wind turbine that doubles as a signature design feature. (Together, the panels and the turbine generate about 15 percent of the building's power.) There's also a "gray water" system that captures and cleans water from the sinks and showers and uses it to flush the toilets, as well as a 10,000-gallon storage tank that collects rainwater for use on the landscaping. Banks says the energy-saving features will save 22 percent on utility costs.

Rainbow/New Carver apartments, Los Angeles

Rainbow, an 89-unit single-room occupancy building for formerly homeless residents in Los Angeles's downtown Skid Row

neighborhood, was completed in 2007. New Carver is slated to start construction this month.

Skid Row Housing Trust, a nonprofit builder and operator of affordable housing, hired Los Angeles architect Michael Maltzan, known for designing museums, schools and high-end single-family homes. Maltzan set up the units in a U-shape surrounding a second-floor courtyard, which is lined with meeting rooms, eating areas and gathering spaces. He says the courtyard was meant to be a "bridge" between the solitude of the apartment units and the temptations and dangers of the streets. Now Skid Row has hired Maltzan to design a second project, the New Carver Apartments. This building will be shaped like a gear, with apartments arranged in a sawtooth pattern around a circular courtyard. The sawtooth design -- corners of each unit jut out from the building's exterior -- maximizes the natural light in each apartment by providing another surface for a window, Maltzan says.

Schermerhorn House, Brooklyn, N.Y.:

Eleven-story, 217-unit apartment building in Brooklyn's Boerum Hill neighborhood, to be completed this year. Units are for households earning under 60 percent of the area's median income, and half will be reserved for the homeless or people with special needs.

Schermerhorn House will be surrounded by luxury condominiums and townhouses, so developers Common Ground and the Actors Fund knew good design was vital to winning local support. They interviewed top architects, and in a sign of growing interest in affordable housing, nearly all of them expressed interest. "I was even worried if they were going to take my call," says Nadine Maleh, Common Ground's director of design and construction. The developers chose Polshek Partnership, a New York firm known for high-profile projects such as the Clinton Presidential Library in Little Rock, Ark., and the new planetarium building in New York's Museum of Natural History. Polshek's design -- which has a glass facade and a rooftop garden -- is meant to fit in with the surrounding buildings. But the glass wall isn't just for looks: Due to site restrictions, part of the project had to be built atop a subway tunnel, a complex

engineering challenge. Instead of making the north wall out of heavy masonry, the architects used textured glass, which is lighter and allowed for less costly support trusses. "Constraints can be challenging, but they can provide opportunity," says Polshek principal Susan Rodriguez. Polshek, like many prominent firms working in this field, charged a reduced fee.