

Regional Focus: Northeast

NYC introduces high-rise, high-density HOPE VI

By Bendix Anderson

New York City – This city does HOPE VI a little differently. Last June, workers broke ground on the first part of a \$148 million, three-phase redevelopment that will transform Prospect Plaza, a 368-unit housing authority project in the Brooklyn neighborhood of Brownsville, into a 578-unit mixed-income project using a \$21.4 million HOPE VI grant from the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD).

Prospect Plaza is not a typical HOPE VI project, in which dilapidated public housing towers are knocked down and replaced with lower-density, mixed-income townhouses. At Prospect Plaza, three of the four 12- to 15-story towers will be left standing when the redevelopment is finished in 2005.

“We are absolutely committed to maintaining the number of housing units that were there when we started,” said Douglas Apple, a general manager for the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA). “We’re actually increasing density.”

The completed development will include 37 two-family brick townhouses, which will be purchased by their mixed-income residents; 323 new and rehabilitated public housing units reserved for very low income tenants; and 218 apartments subsidized by low-income housing tax credits.

NYCHA accomplished its goal by finding empty land around the project to fill with new housing, in particular the mostly empty parking lots and lawn at the foot of Prospect Plaza’s towers.

The project’s second phase will develop this barely used space, lining the streets of the project’s 11-acre, three-block site with 138 rental units set in three- and four-story townhouses. The project’s three towers will rise up out of the middle of the blocks.

The townhouses will cut the visual impact of the towers, help the project match the surrounding neighborhood, and add some peaceful, residential activity to the once-dangerous and barren streets.

“There’s going to be people on stoops and people on the street,” said Petr Stand, an architect for Magnusson Architecture and Planning (MAP), based in Manhattan. Stand is one of the architects of the project’s second phase. “It’s going to be lively and perceptually safer.”

Prospect Plaza is being financed by only the second HOPE VI grant received by the city, in part because the city has few of the severely distressed properties that HOPE VI was designed to repair.

“There aren’t a lot of disasters here,” said Ron Moelis, principal for L&M Equity Participants, the developer of phase two.

In many cities, public housing projects slated for redevelopment are largely unoccupied. That’s usually because many units are uninhabitable or the project has such a bad reputation that potential tenants would rather lose their place on the housing authority’s waiting list than take an apartment there.

But New York City’s public housing projects are 99% occupied, according to NYCHA officials, with long waiting lists and a low 5% turnover rate. Replacing New York’s high-rise public housing with lower-density townhouses is simply not an option. And the city’s residents have no problem living in high-rise housing.

Magnus Magnusson, another architect for MAP, and Stand



Prospect Plaza in the Brooklyn neighborhood of Brownsville will be transformed into a 578-unit mixed-income project.

feel that their design for Prospect Plaza could be applied to other large public housing projects with available land on or near their sites. New York City has 181,000 units of public housing in 346 projects. Fortunately, the city also has some other sources of capital that could be leveraged in the same way as a HOPE VI grant.

“You can create that model here in New York with other resources,” Apple said. “We have HDC [the New York City Housing Development Corp.], which can drive housing finance.”

Because the original HOPE VI grant was issued in 1998, a few former tenants are beginning to worry that they may never move back into the finished Prospect Plaza.

Fortunately the redevelopment is getting up to speed, and the financing for phase two was expected to close by the end of 2003, with construction starting early in 2004. “They’re about 80% done with their design and construction documents,” Apple said. NYCHA has selected Michaels Development as the developer for phase three, and hopes that construction on that phase will also start in 2004. ■

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