

The New Face of Affordable Housing

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Last month's eNewsletter issue, [*What is Affordable Housing?*](#), gave readers an overview of the different approaches to providing affordable housing. In this issue, we'll address a subset of the affordable housing picture by exploring design improvements to units that receive capital subsidies for construction.

Any mention of affordable housing often conjures up a negative mental image. One person pictures a giant monolith seen from anywhere in the city, surrounded by parking lots. Another envisions a complex of cheaply built apartments with no character and little connection to the surrounding community. Whether in our community or when we travel around the country, we have been able to spot them a mile away. They are dismissed as “the projects,” and they continue to shape negative perceptions about affordable housing.

Today's affordable housing is different — we have learned from the mistakes of the past. We've learned that inexpensive construction deteriorates quickly and is expensive to maintain. We've also learned that developments that are physically and/or architecturally isolated from the community tend to isolate residents. Finally, we've learned that quality affordable housing can engender a deeper sense of pride in its residents.

Affordable Housing Blends In

Keeping these lessons in mind, newer affordable housing is built to fit in to the context of existing neighborhoods. Developers take a serious look at whether a building can be restored before tearing it down. Architects look at the surrounding neighborhood for architectural details they can mimic in their new buildings, and work to insure developments are integrated into the community.



These new units have bamboo floors, high efficiency boilers, Energy Star appliances, and cement board siding that looks like clapboard. Utility bills should be 30% less than conventional housing.

Affordable housing units are built within existing neighborhoods to create mixed income neighborhoods versus islands of low income households. Many affordable housing projects serve various public purposes in addition to housing such as community development, historic restoration, and brownfield remediation. They actually add value to neighborhoods and communities at large. In contrast to yesterday's affordable housing, which most of us could point out as we drove into any town, many people are hard pressed to find today's affordable housing even when they are told where it is. It is often the best looking housing in a given area.



This development in Poughkeepsie involved the historic restoration of seven Queen-Anne style townhouses into seven affordable two-family homes.

Quality and Efficiency

In addition to design improvements, there has been a significant improvement in quality. New affordable units are built to be long lasting and energy efficient. Kitchens have solid wood cabinets. Hardwood floors have replaced cheap carpet. This higher-quality construction has proven to be cheaper in the long run since it requires less upkeep for the homeowner or landlord.

Advances in technology have made renewable and energy efficient materials much more affordable. Hardiplank, a cement fiber siding material that looks like clapboard, is very sturdy, has a higher insulation value than vinyl, is made from recycled materials, can be painted any color, and requires much less maintenance than traditional wood siding. This siding has been used on the last three affordable housing developments built in Dutchess County. It represents a high standard that even many expensive homes have failed to incorporate. High efficiency boilers and Energy Star appliances have lowered monthly utility bills by as much as 30%. Affordable housing even uses renewable resources such as bamboo for flooring.

While the affordable housing of the urban renewal era serves as a constant reminder of past errors, new affordable housing is helping to create and restore communities.

For More Information

[Energy Star](#)

[Affordable Housing Design Advisor](#)

(developed by the US Department of Housing and Urban Development)

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This newsletter was developed by the Dutchess County Department of Planning and Development, in conjunction with the Dutchess County Planning Federation.

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