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Green for All

THE NEW ETHOS OF LOW-INCOME HOUSING: A SUSTAINABLE, WELL-DESIGNED PLACE TO CALL HOME. BY MOLLY KINCAID

"JUST BECAUSE THEY AREN'T PRIVILEGED DOESN'T MEAN THE POOR SHOULD BE DEPRIVED OF GOOD DESIGN"

The problem with low-income housing in the United States has long been the housing itself. Impersonal, poorly built, high-density "projects" feel more like a punishment to the people who live in them than a gesture of support. Carelessly designed, ill-maintained high-rises soon begin to perpetuate the cycle of poverty instead of helping to break it. And most of the country's homeless would rather sleep on the street than in the so-called shelters provided for their use.

But a new crop of architects have come along to challenge the unacceptable status quo. Not only do they believe that housing for the homeless and for low-income families and individuals should be aesthetically pleasing, they think it should be healthy, too—and an increasing number of cities

are beginning to put up modern, morale-building residences that also adhere to the best principles of green construction.

"Just because they aren't privileged," says architect Lawrence Scarpa of Santa Monica's Pugh + Scarpa, "doesn't mean the poor should be deprived of good design."

The movement is most visible in California, thanks to the state's strict Title 24 regulations, which were created by the California Energy Commission to set statewide efficiency standards in new construction. Pugh + Scarpa's Broadway Court project in Santa Monica (see page 108) exceeds those greening regulations by 30 percent. The 41 units house formerly homeless individuals, who now enjoy whimsical design and spacious apartments that range from 820 to 1,050 square feet. The construction utilizes dual-ventilation, low-VOC products and an elaborate network of shades and canopies that help control climate and add a sculptural element to the exterior. "Much of this population's income goes to utilities," Scarpa says, "so it's even more important to make the buildings energy-efficient."

WENTWORTH COMMONS
Rooftop solar panels provide energy and a novel aesthetic to this Chicago project, designed by Harley Ellis Devereaux.



cities are very much made up of the map of their icons, then cities are mostly amalgamations of corporate offices, churches, schools, etc.," says Maltzan. "I think projects like this should be part of that map."

New Orleans is also pursuing sustainability in its low-income development. Drew Lang, of the New York-based Lang Architecture, grew up in New Orleans. The firm's colossal Faubourg St. Roch project will build new green structures and retrofit older houses throughout a nine-block radius, which includes 139 house lots in the historic marketplace. It was an area of poverty before Katrina, and now the community is without the most basic commercial and social services. "In New Orleans, the biggest challenges we have are the problems that have been going on for a long time—fundamental things like drainage problems and failing infrastructure—and that's where these sustainable building technologies are going to come into play," says Lang. "We want to incorporate the rich history of the area. We're trying to write the next chapter by doing things differently but still trying to preserve and revitalize what's there."

As Chicago architect Susan King of the firm Harley Ellis Devereaux points out, while it's hard to secure funding for these types of projects, the development community has embraced an unprecedented camaraderie when it comes to green. She designed Wentworth Commons (page 106) for the firm. Its 51 units are inhabited by a mix of formerly homeless families and individuals. Solar panels, perched at acute angles with the roof, cast a fanciful feel to Wentworth; it's a far cry from the monotonous low-income projects of the old days. King remembers a recent program aimed at teaching kids to take care of plants on the grounds. At the meeting a precocious child raised his hand and spouted the statistic that the panels provide 25 percent of the building's energy. Anecdotes like that make it clear: This new housing movement is a significant force for change. ●