



Neighborhood Women Renaissance Housing

Jane McGroarty

Neighborhood Women Renaissance Housing occupies three gracious buildings on the grounds of the former Greenpoint Hospital in the Williamsburgh neighborhood of Brooklyn. Completed five years ago, the rehabilitation of these turn-of-the-century buildings into thirty-three units of housing, sponsored by Neighborhood Women of Williamsburgh/Greenpoint, is a tale of perseverance by women with a vision of community. It is also a story about participatory design that challenged bureaucratic assumptions about women, their families, and low-income housing.

Many of the residents have lived in Renaissance Housing since it opened. There is little turnover; typically families move because they have grown in size. Eda Morales, an energetic and outspoken woman, is one the original residents. A lifelong resident of Williamsburgh, Eda applied for an apartment because her landlady had begun a campaign to drive Eda and her children out in order to renovate their apartment. Eda's application was approved, and she selected her apartment from a floor plan.

Five years later, she still remembers the day she moved in and first saw her apartment. "I came in and looked around and said 'Wow!'" Eda's is an airy two-bedroom third floor corner apartment with large windows — "Nine," she says proudly. Polished wood floors, a huge kitchen, high ceilings and five closets make it a comfortable place to live. Eda's "eat-in-kitchen" would be the envy of most New Yorkers. It accommodates a large dining room table with space left over for a china cabinet or cupboard. The cooking area is also spa-

cious with counter space on both sides of the sink and the stove. And, best of all, it has two windows.

Unusual collaboration

What Eda Morales and the other new residents of Renaissance Housing didn't know when they moved into their new apartments was that the design was the result of an unusual collaboration between the architect, Katrin Adam, and the developer, Neighborhood Women of Williamsburgh and Greenpoint. Instead of the typical low income housing where the architect designs for anonymous clients using minimum standards, Neighborhood Women worked closely with Adam to provide a community of apartments that were carefully designed to meet the specific needs and aspirations of women and their families.

The seeds of Neighborhood Women Renaissance Housing were sown almost twenty-five years ago, as two extraordinary women, architect Katrin Adam and community activist Jan Petersen, were each embarking on paths that eventually intersected in Brooklyn with this housing development for women and their families. Katrin Adam was trained as a journeyman cabinetmaker in her native Munich, Germany. She went on to study interior architecture there and obtained an architectural license in the United States. In 1975 Adam and six other women (Phyllis Birkby, Ellen Perry Berkeley, Leslie Kanes Weisman, Marie Kennedy and Joan Forrester Sprague) founded the Women's School of Architecture and Planning (WSAP), which sponsored annual summer programs.

Demographics of low income housing

At one WSAP session, Helen Helfer from the Women's Policy Division of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) held a seminar presenting ideas HUD was exploring; namely that women and their children were the major residents of low income housing and that the agency ought to redirect its efforts toward their needs. This realization of the demographics of poverty led Adam and two other WSPA members to think seriously about developing housing for women.

In 1979 Katrin Adam, Joan Sprague and Susan Aitchison formed the Women's Development Corporation (WDC) in Providence, Rhode Island with the goal of developing housing and economic independence for low income women in that community. With a federal grant from the Community Service and the Economic Development Administrations, the team began to work on economic and housing development. Adam's role was to meet with community women and develop programs (a set of needs) which could be translated into physical form when housing sites were acquired for rehabilitation. Over a period of several years, Adam worked with women and created a series of exercises designed to help women to give voice to their aspirations.

In 1983 Adam received an NEA grant to develop "quality housing" standards for urban homesteading efforts in New York's Lower East Side. She was contacted by a group of Hispanic women who were rehabilitating a building through NYC Housing and Preservation Development (HPD) and Catholic Charities, the non-profit sponsor. Although the women were working exhaustively on a sweat equity project, Adam found that previously planned apartment layouts to be boilerplate at best and that the homesteaders had no idea which apartments they might eventually live in. The program required homesteaders to remain in their apartments for thirty years before they would be entitled to equity.

Appalled at the minimal design and planning for a project intended to serve long range needs, Adam was engaged to design the building for the homesteaders. Using exercises she developed in Providence, Adam helped the women and their families allocate the apartment units and begin to refine their layouts, keeping within the constraints of the Building Code and the footprint of an old-law tenement building.

Community hospital

Meanwhile, just across the East River in the Brooklyn neighborhoods of Williamsburgh and Greenpoint, a fight was brewing over New York City's decision to close a community hospital in 1981. A local chapter of the National Congress of Neighborhood Women (NCNW) was at the forefront of the fray. Its founder, Jan Peterson, was no stranger to grass-roots activism.

Early in her life as the first in her family to attend college, she confronted the contradiction between "moving up and out" and community preservation. Recognizing the integral connection between women and community, Peterson founded NCNW in 1974 to educate women for leadership positions in their communities. In 1977 Peterson went to work in the President's Office of Public Liaison during the Carter Administration. It was there that she met women at Housing and Urban Development (HUD) who were advocates of a national public housing policy that was more responsive to women. By the 1980's Peterson was back in her Williamsburgh neighborhood working with Neighborhood Women of Williamsburgh/Greenpoint, the local chapter of NCNW.

The community lost the battle to save Greenpoint Hospital, but in the process became in-



Neighborhood Women Renaissance Housing converted a former hospital to housing for low-income women and children. Photos by Jennifer Krogh.

volved in its disposition. Several neighborhoods groups, including those formed by NCNW “graduates,” created a coalition which eventually gained control of several hospital buildings in a court action.

Control of space

While the empowerment of women as leaders through education was important, Peterson also came to realize that control of space was a cornerstone in helping women to preserve their communities. By this time Katrin Adam had established a reputation as an architect willing to work with community groups seeking responsive housing. Jan Peterson sought Adam’s assistance for a project to develop housing in three of the hospital buildings that the community now controlled.



They submitted initial plans to NYC’s Department of Housing, Preservation and Development (HPD) in order to get a proposal in the process. Then Adam sat down with the Neighborhood Women and prospective residents to carefully plan the actual project. In the process they were able to rethink the traditional formulas for designing low income housing.

Supporting family life

Not surprisingly, Adam found that many of the features that low income women desired in housing are universal — safe, healthy, adaptable and comfortable dwellings that support child rearing and family life. Although all of their ideas were not implemented in the final design, they fought vigorously with HPD and were able to realize some.

Kitchen design and size proved to be the most troublesome. Like the homesteading women in the Lower East Side, the women in Brooklyn wanted large open kitchens that allowed for more family interaction and cooking by more than one person. The NYC Building Code permits kitchens to be windowless if less than 59 sf. Since other living spaces always require windows, tiny kitchens or kitchenettes were an expedient way to sat-



Efficiency apartment could accommodate teenage mother, however city design criteria do not allow less than 120 sf for a single bedroom.

Built Floor Plan

Lab Building, Typical Floor

Additional door to secure unrestricted movement between apartments.

Typical open kitchen to living room.



isfy the cooking requirement without “sacrificing” a window (the kitchenette had become a universal feature of New York City apartments built after the late 1950’s regardless of the income range of the end users).

One woman declared she wanted “her children to learn to cook by osmosis,” by being in the kitchen as she had learned from her own mother. The women, many of whom are single working mothers, all agreed that preparing dinner was also a time for talking with their children or helping with homework — activities not possible in a kitchen designed for one person.

Mary Alice Richardson, a long time member of the Congress of Neighborhood Women, was one of the women who participated in planning sessions with Katrin Adam. The process not only resulted in enabling women to help “design” the project but also served to educate women about architecture and construction. As Ms. Richardson puts it, “I’ll never again look at a building without thinking about all of the decisions that go into it — the intricate planning, the placement of windows and doors.”

A community room was another concept initially rejected by HPD but later included. The

disagreements between HPD and the developers were frequently over extending minimum standards to provide more livable housing. Cost was not always the issue as, for example, in the decision to furnish closet space in bedrooms. The women were willing to trade larger rooms for closets in order to have storage for personal items and clothing, and appreciated being able to have that choice. Several women noted that bedroom closets would provide clothing storage for families who might not be able to afford dressers.

Another amenity that was debated was the concept of a guest room which could be used by several families for visiting relatives, such as grown children or grandparents. Many women felt it was an important feature, although they had concerns about “getting rid” of a guest that might overstay. Connections between units that would allow for expansion, as well as shared child care, were also debated. Unfortunately, in the end, shared guest spaces, two-family units and expandable units were eliminated because these concepts were not part of the vocabulary of HPD housing standards.

Many of the final design features of Neighborhood Women Renaissance Housing are ones that more affluent clients take for granted, such as well



Neighborhood Women Renaissance Housing resident and Board member Eda Morales. Photo by Jane McGoarty.

Flexible Arrangements

A Variety of kitchen, dining and living room arrangements which allow for more flexibility in use. For instance, a larger family kitchen with a connected smaller living room which could serve other functions when needed, or an open kitchen to dining/living room which would support family gatherings and easier child supervision.

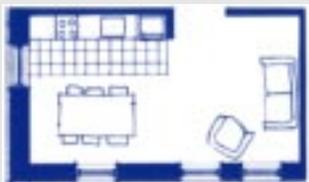


Linked Units

Individual dwelling units which can be linked with a door. A single person, (grandparent, auntie, uncle or friend) could then share family life and responsibilities, while both entities would retain privacy and an independent lifestyle.

Two Family Units

Two family apartments with a centrally located shared “eat-in” kitchen and living room. Each family would retain its private bedrooms, bathrooms and entrance. The kitchen would have separate food preparation areas for each family. This “transitional” apartment arrangement would be particularly supportive for two women with children who are preparing for or are reentering the work force. It would accommodate shared child care by one of the mothers or outside help.



thought out kitchen design that takes into account the activities of cooking, adequate storage, or sensitive placement of light fixtures. The more innovative ideas were squelched by HPD, which defines “family” and “dwelling unit” too narrowly.

Intransigent bureaucracy

For the women who spent countless volunteer hours on the project, the most disappointing aspect was dealing with an intransigent bureaucracy that resisted new ideas, even when they brought a better solution and added no extra cost. During the process an HPD official flatly stated, “we are not here to design; we are not advocates for housing design.” The project also ran into obstacles from New York City housing policy when the time came to allocate the apartments in Renaissance Housing. Prospective tenants were selected by lottery, which meant that many of the women who had participated in the planning process did not get apartments. While all initial tenants were deserving, the citywide lottery concept (which did not favor current neighborhood residents) was inconsistent with the concepts of preserving communities and recognizing the commitment of the volunteers who had worked to create the housing.

The pioneer residents at Renaissance remember some of the tribulations of moving into the newly renovated buildings. They suffered through resolution of the “punch list” as the contractor corrected various deficiencies in the construction work. For six months they didn’t get mail because the post office refused to deliver mail to each building separately. For two years the local cable TV company did not recognize the buildings as dwellings and would not install its wiring.

As these annoyances have passed into the realm of amusing recollections, tenants struggle with building maintenance — they’ve been through three superintendents. Landscaping and surfacing of an outdoor yard are not yet completed for lack of funds. The NYC agency, Housing Preservation and Development (HPD), that oversees the project does not permit Renaissance Housing to self manage — they are required to hire professional management. In spite of this, the board of Neighborhood Women Renaissance Housing, which includes tenants, struggles to maintain the buildings properly and to hold management more accountable. Recently a new superintendent was recruited through Neighborhood Women and the

board is optimistic that maintenance will improve. Unfortunately management difficulties are not unique to Renaissance Housing; monies for capital development are easier to secure than funds for ongoing maintenance and amenities not considered essential for low-income tenants.

Looking forward

The stately three story Renaissance-style brick buildings originally housed various hospital departments, including a morgue. Renaissance Housing, and a fourth building converted into housing by another neighborhood group, today share the former hospital site with a men’s shelter, several unoccupied buildings, and overgrown open space. Residents, hopeful that the rest of the complex will be rehabilitated, look forward to a proposed nursing home across the street and the conversion of one of the hospital buildings into doctor’s offices.

All too often housing for people with low incomes is shoddy, though not inexpensive. Bureaucrats, developers, and contractors are paid well with minimal accountability to the public at large or to the future residents, who are expected to be grateful. Renaissance Housing demonstrates that good design and sensitivity to inhabitants need not cost more and is, ultimately, a responsible investment that encourages pride of dwelling, long term commitment by tenants, and community stabilization. With government zealously turning welfare into workfare, Neighborhood Women Renaissance Housing provides a timely model for empowerment, responsive housing, and community building.

Jane McGroarty is a registered architect practicing in Brooklyn. A graduate of UCLA’s School of Architecture and Planning, she is currently the Vice-President of Architects/ Designers/ Planners for Social Responsibility.

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