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BAY AREA'S BEST DESIGN ISN'T JUST FOR THE RICH

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When the San Francisco chapter of the American Institute of Architects handed out design awards this spring, the winners included such trophies as a private home above Golden Gate Park.

But not all the winners were so rarefied. Three architecture prizes went to housing complexes built by nonprofit developers, while an urban design commendation celebrated the rebirth of a public housing project.

This isn't a fluke, or political correctness applied to subsidized housing. It reflects a surprising aspect of today's urban landscape: Many of the most progressive buildings -- both in appearance and function -- are designed expressly for low- and moderate-income residents.

"Nonprofit developers often are more open to freedom and creativity in design," said architect Anne Phillips, who received an AIA award for Margaret Breland Homes in Berkeley, a brightly colored collection of 25 apartments for low-income seniors. "They aren't thinking about some imaginary buyer they're catering to. They're just out to provide good places to live."

The presence of high-quality affordable housing isn't new. Nor is it confined to the Bay Area. What's different now is that subsidized housing projects are being added to more cities, in more visible locations.

There's funding available, such as the \$850 million earmarked for infill development as part of the Prop. 13C housing bond approved in November by voters. There's also political impetus: The need for affordable housing is so pervasive that communities are more open to the idea than in the past.

In the suburbs, many projects stress neotraditional looks that aim to placate critics who don't want anything that seems out of place. But in urban districts with a mix of architectural styles, the result can be an adventurous change of pace.

Margaret Breland Homes, the senior housing designed by Anne Phillips Architecture for Jubilee Restoration and Resources for Community Development, illustrates this.

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Breland Homes is bigger than anything around it, a long four-story structure inserted into the middle of a block on San Pablo Avenue between a car repair shop and single-family homes. But instead of being a single brick-shaped slab, Phillips' design pulls apart the structure on the upper floors to allow in air and light.

The third and fourth floors show the most dramatic gap. There's a 35-foot-wide space separating their east and west sections, allowing room for a courtyard in between. It feels like a town square, with the laundry room opening off it while fourth-floor residents can look down from an open-air bridge that leads to each unit's front door.

There's another terrace on the fourth floor above San Pablo. It's 10 feet wide, with the sidewalk's mature London Plane giving it a snug tree house feel -- albeit one framed by apartments clad in corrugated steel, above a flat central facade illuminated by rich yellow stucco.

For the residents, the retreats are social amenities. For neighbors and passers-by, breaking the upper floors into smaller pieces makes the structure as a whole less overwhelming -- a contrast to recent market-rate apartment complexes in Berkeley that fill every inch of space they can, looking like squat tubs as a result.

"It just seemed like the right move to make," Phillips said. "The courtyards that work best are in the middle of things, not ones stuck on the roof."

Moves like this aren't cheap. Breaking the mass into pieces meant more surface area to cover, and it created the need for extra fire escape routes. But there's a long-term payoff.

"We need buildings that age well and look good because this is our legacy," said Dan Sawislak, executive director for Resources for Community Development. "We have to be able to show them to municipalities where we want to build."

Another element found in many of these projects is an emphasis on environmental sustainability that existed long before "green" became a buzzword.

Case in point: Folsom/Dore Apartments, the first mixed-use project in the Bay Area to be certified by the U.S. Green Building Council under its Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design program.

Aesthetically, the 98-unit complex for low-income adults is chaotic, a six-story collage of materials and forms that includes a portion of the brick warehouse that once occupied this site on an industrial block of San Francisco's Folsom Street.

At the same time, the design by David Baker Architects weaves green building elements through the project with holistic grace. Some strokes are large, such as the photovoltaic panels that generate energy for the common areas. Other touches are subtle, from the emphasis on natural ventilation to the use of

fluorescent lighting in kitchens and bathrooms.

Developers play down the altruism in such moves, stressing that their applications for tax credits and grants are helped by sustainable elements.

"The bar is set very high. Many funders require certain construction standards and very specific items," said Scott Falcone, director of development for Citizens Housing Corp., which developed and manages Folsom/Dore Apartments.

Architect Baker sees another factor at work.

"Nonprofits tend to be idealistic. They want to do green not for marketing, but because it's part of their mission of saving the world," Baker said. "The best ones really want to do something beautiful and special."

There's also an element of self-preservation.

The swift and grim decline of many public housing projects erected in the mid-20th century attached a stigma to affordable housing that persists; in Baker's words, "critics still think there will be mattresses burning in the parking lot."

Now, though, some of the worst projects have been transformed -- built from scratch with sensitivity for how community might be nurtured over time.

This is seen in San Francisco's Mission District, where the 260-unit Valencia Gardens opened last fall on the 5-acre site where its predecessor was leveled in 2004.

The original Valencia Gardens was an enclave detached from the surrounding blocks, part of the reason it became crime-ridden and dangerous. By contrast, the new design introduces townhouse-lined streets to the block between Valencia, Guerrero, 14th and 15th streets. There are wide sidewalks for children to play; the community room comes with a garage-door-like wall that opens onto a plaza where sculptures by Beniamino Bufano were relocated from the original project.

It's an extremely dense project, especially where narrow three-story townhouses line up along Guerrero and 15th streets. Yet the design by Van Meter Williams Pollack for Mission Housing Development Corp. is engaging and smart. The contemporary look includes strong bays that snap out toward the street to echo the Mission District rhythm around them. Also, the molded concrete bases of the buildings create an air of rooted permanence. They send the optimistic message that this community is here to stay.

As different as these projects are, that's the common element. They're investments in the future; they want to be as good as they possibly can be. And it shows.

Online resources

For a list of the 2007 AIA San Francisco Design Award winners, go to

links.sfgate.com/ZIK

For a study of the sustainable design elements in the Folsom/Dore Apartments

links.sfgate.com/ZIL

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