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Architects Jazz Up Public Senior Housing

By Violate Law



For too long, most publicly funded housing for seniors and the disabled bordered on being dull, if not downright dismal and “institutional.” But thanks to architects who lavish the kind of thoughtful design attention hitherto rarely seen in such developments, and clients who are increasingly willing to take a change on them, even some publicly funded projects are

breaking the mold.

Victor Regnier, FAIA, a University of Southern California professor who specializes in senior-housing design, is currently writing a book on the subject—timely, given the growing demand for these buildings as a baby boomers age. Regnier sees a dawning willingness on the part of housing officials to invite innovative design. There’s also a

new political will to demand it.

One project resulting from this push is Near North Apartments, a single-room occupancy building designed by Helmut Jahn of Murphy/Jahn Architects. Mercy Housing Lakefront commissioned the \$14 million, 96-unit facility to provide permanent residences for low-income or formerly homeless people, some of whom are

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elderly and disabled. Completed this spring, it stands on the site of Cabrini-Green, an infamous Chicago housing project now mostly demolished. The five-story building is clad in rippled, satin-finished stainless-steel siding. This unpolished façade is tempered by round edges near the rooftop and large, punched windows who ecoated glazing reflects a faint blue tint. Its elegant, Minimalist design stands out—which is exactly what Cindy Holler, the nonprofit’s president, wanted. “It’s okay not to blend in and to be provocative.”

Other new buildings are aiming for a more subtle approach, evocative rather than provocative. A 108-public housing complex for the elderly in Pittsburgh, developed by McCormack Baron Salazar, incorporates the history of an African-American neighborhood into its façade. Architect Dan Rothschild, AIA of Rothschild Doyno Architects, says he was inspired by the storied Hill District, a popular stop for jazz musicians during the 1920’s to 1940’s. He incorporated the spirit of jazz into the building’s plan by dividing the front elevation into segments whose widths vary to the relative length of musical notes—a quarter note, half note, or whole note—adding visual rhythm to the streetscape. Construction of the \$13 million complex finishes next month. Regnier observes that more and more projects like this one are employing better design to serve the population they house. “There has been a stronger focus on developing contextually based designs that gear toward the community and reflect what the



city is about,” he explains.

Consideration of context can be achieved not only with exterior details, but also through the architectural program. Regnier cites the Burbank Senior Artists Colony, a complex of 141 senior apartments located near major movie studios in Burbank, California, developed by Meta Housing with some government support. Scheurer Architects designed two recording studios

as well as a small theater so that the facility’s residents can flex their creative muscles by producing plays and films.