

Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

SEPTEMBER 10, 2008

New Apartments Jazz Up the Hill

By Diana Nelson Jones



Rickwood Campbell misses the panoramic view he had at the senior high-rise in Addison Terrace, but what he misses most are the vibrant patterns of life he remembers from “the Old Hill,” the title of a poem he read to a crowd at Thursday’s dedication of the new Legacy apartments.

After numerous city and state officials thanked each other and their staffs for getting the replacement low-rise built in the 2100 block of Wylie and Centre avenues, his recitation brought some 200 people to their feet in the ad-libbed last line, “and maybe will be again.”

The old Hill is history, but investment is promising the neighborhood a new vibrancy,

replacing long stretches of grassy fields and weedy lots with new buildings. The Legacy has been open for about two months and is at capacity, with 108 apartments and a street level ready for retail.

The \$16.1 million project was financed with loans, bond allocations and tax credits from the Pennsylvania Housing Finance Agency, the city Urban Redevelopment Authority, Sun America Housing and the Pittsburgh Housing Authority.

It replaced the Louis Mason Jr. high-rise that now sits empty on a knoll several blocks away, and is in keeping with Pittsburgh Housing Authority’s effort to house its clients amid the community instead of in segregated complexes.

Construction began in December 2005 but planning started seven years ago, said Richard Baron, a principle with McCormack Baron Salazar, the developer. “We had been looking at a lot of vacant land here for many years,” he said.

Named in tribute of the Hill’s jazz legacy, the building fronts on Wylie, with limestone panels inscribed with the names of jazz legends with local ties.

“As you live your life, you get your rewards,” said drummer Roger Humphries, whose band played at the event and whose name is inscribed beside guitar George Benson’s. “There are a lot of great people on that building. I feel very blessed to be up there with them.”

They include native sons Ahmad Jamal, Billy Eckstine and Stanley Turrentine.

The building is whimsical in its use of color, with vertical segments of brick hues of apricot, tan and red. Built on a slope, it narrows as it climbs from four to three stories, implying movement. Its fourth story is gray all the way across, suggesting a mansard roof.

The goal of the design was to provide people with a sense of place, said Dan Rothschild, president of Rothschild Doyno Architects.

The old high-rise, not so old at 42, became obsolete and inefficient because social policy today rejects that of the mid-’60s, which was “to dispatch people to the boundaries,

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away from community services and interaction," he said. "What you're seeing is a reversal of that policy, allowing people to age on Main Street."

Fulton Meachem Jr., executive director of the housing authority, said the residents themselves "had a lot to do with the design and the naming of the building."

The nod to the jazz tradition is a good signal to children, he said.

"What our kids need is to be able to reflect on who has gone before them and on who they can be."

Laura Ferguson has lived her life in the Hill and lived 11 years in the high-rise. She said she and other residents "are in fellowship with each other more here" at the Legacy. "I love it. It's beautiful."

"I grew up around the corner on

Davenport Street," said Michelle Porter, a development specialist for the housing authority. "I remember walking past the pool hall on my way to Pat's Place to buy candy, so it's a sense of personal satisfaction I feel today. Who'd have thought I'd have the chance to participate this way in my old neighborhood?"

Outside, under a big tent, the crowd listened to Mr. Campbell's lines of poetry, nodding their heads and chuckling as he read: "the down-home flavor of knowing your neighbor" ... "cabaret 'til you wear out your shoes" ... "like streetcar tracks and barbecue shacks."

After the crowd dispersed to tour the building and study the names in limestone, individuals sought out Mr. Crawford to shake his hand. He had evoked images of a

rhythmic density of a life they had shared.

Now, he lives in a building that brings a little density back to the neighborhood. A diagonal line drawn from the New Granada Theater to the Crawford Grill would cut right through it. Both once-great jazz clubs are silent now, but the Legacy occupies what two years ago was a block of mostly vacant lots.

And by mid-day, the music of Roger Humphries' band on the outdoor patio carried out into the neighborhood.