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New-Design Housing Making Mark in City

By ROBERTA B. GRATZ

A new look in government-supported housing is making an impact on New York's cityscape.

The new architectural style—architectural "vocabulary," the professionals call it—has for common denominators large brown brick, anodized aluminum windows, intriguing angles and setbacks and an overall appearance not normally expected for public housing.

Three complexes in different areas of the city all have that same architectural signature and are currently in different stages of construction—Waterside, a privately-sponsored, city-aided complex at 23d St. and the East River; Harlem River Park Houses, an Urban Development Corp. development on the Bronx side of the river and three buildings in the Ruppert Brewery Urban Renewal in Yorkville.

Used Before

All three developments were designed by the architectural firm of Davis, Brody and Associates. They do not mark the debut of a new design concept since many of the elements have been used by Davis, Brody in other buildings around the city. But they are, so far, the largest and most noticeable.

Lou Davis and Samuel Brody liken that growing recognition to what followed the construction of Lever House and the Seagram Building on Park Av. in the 1950s. "They were the first of the glass office towers with large plaza space," says Davis, "and represented a strong design philosophy that when later copied lost its individuality."

Their own design solution, Davis and Brody say, was the result of a determined effort to "deal with mass housing subsidy programs with economics that made sense and a look that was

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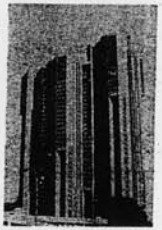
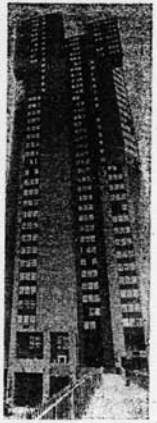


Pond Photos by Arthur Pomerantz

Two similarly inspired projects using angular architecture, aluminum windows, cantilevers and large brown brick are the Harlem River Park Houses (top) in the Bronx and the Waterside complex on the East River at 23d St.



The Changing Shape of Public Housing

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not of a cookie-cutter mold."

They have used it, Davis and Brody say, in a variety of housing complexes that are quite different from each other even though the common denominators remain constant. At Waterside, there are four "pinwheel towers." At Harlem River, there is a pair of "S-shape" superstructures. And at an earlier South Bronx Urban Renewal complex called Lambert Houses, there are low-rise duplex apartments around a courtyard.

There are others too and in each the plaza, garage, recreational facilities, landscaping and commercial space, Davis and Brody point out, make the distinctions between each project very obvious.

But to the untrained eye, all these new apartment houses spell change—something new on the scene after years of being told by government that the only things economically feasible were austere, red brick boxes. In fact, former Housing and Development Administrator Albert Walsh said frequently: "Every additional angle costs too much more money."

Davis and Brody have angles, setbacks and cantilevers all over the place but to hear them explain it makes one wonder about all those earlier pronouncements.

"The different shapes at different levels gives more variety to the whole structure," explains Samuel Brody, "and each angle produces a different apartment type. But, the fixed elements of the building—the expensive mechanical elements like plumbing and electric systems—remain unchanged. Thus the cost difference is not as great as you would expect."

Money is saved, they point out, on the brown brick which being larger requires less labor to install but the windows are considerably more expensive. "The premium paid for the windows," Davis says, "is important because some material just represents an institution to the public and this gets away from that institutional look."

Davis and Brody repeatedly point out that they are only part of a larger architectural community that today are more and more involved in public architecture. "It's a post-war generation now in its 40s," says Brody, "that shares a common philosophy toward solving esthetic and social challenges, each having a different signature."

Richard Ravitch, president of HRH Construction Corp. and builder of Waterside, feels a lot of what is being noticed today is the culmination of a decade of moving away from old government restrictions. There was the idea, he says, that government building was "to be non-competitive with private building and that if government money was supporting something it should be austere."

Today, Ravitch points out, there's little private building left to compete with and the "austerity" view has changed.

Many people point to city zoning changes in the early 60s to account for the increasing design consciousness of the past decade. Ravitch, however, argues that it was the "prosperity" of the early 60s that led people to look for "quality in design."

That same quality of design, Ravitch concedes, does not always carry over to interior construction. "Most interiors today are standardized whether in luxury or subsidized housing," Ravitch says. "The differences are in appliances, room size to some extent and details. Really good workmanship is just not available anymore. The skills just aren't there."

This view is echoed by governmental construction experts who point out that there is not much difference between expensive and inexpensive housing construction these days.

There's nothing, they say, to the view that interior construction is being sacrificed for exterior looks because all buildings have the same 8-8 ceilings, dry wall construction and standardized interiors. Everything, they add, is really the same inside. Therefore, the only variable left is the outside appearance.