THE AFFORDABLE HOUSING DESIGN LEADERSHIP INSTITUTE
An Enterprise National Design Initiative
Hosted by Parsons The New School for Design
July 17 - 19, 2012
Enterprise’s mission is to create opportunity for low- and moderate-income people through affordable housing in diverse, thriving communities.

**Enterprise National Design Initiatives**

We believe that good design has the power to improve the quality of life of underserved communities and is essential to the long-term success of affordable housing.

**Affordable Housing Design Leadership Institute**

The Affordable Housing Design Leadership Institute (AHDLI) brings together leaders on the frontline of affordable housing design and development for a two-and-a-half day session focused on innovation and best practices. Two teams: a Design Resource Team of eight expert design innovators and a Development Team of seven forward-thinking developers with projects in the schematic design phase, will join forces to create solutions that will impact real affordable housing projects nationwide.

The session will help community development leaders put into action best practices in sustainable community design, transit-oriented development and green architectural design.

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“Production is great, but we also have to have great impact in what we’re building.”

Donovan Duncan, WRRMC Development Team

“The ideas and options that we got to put on the table were really amazing. I’m just hoping that the developers take this to heart, and I believe they will.”

Ernie Wong, Site Works Design Team

“Look at design alternatives, lots of design alternatives in the early stages, instead of just accepting what your architect gives you in the beginning.”

Sharon Lee, LIHI Development Team

“Reach out early, think holistically, and involve all the partners. These all sound like logical things, but I don’t know that I would have thought that clearly without these two days.”

Marc Norman, UPSTATE Design Team

Invest in Early Design

Though direct feedback on each schematic project is a primary goal of AHDLI, it is clear that the value of the Institute goes beyond improving the design quality of the presented projects. The Institute initiates an open conversation not only about the challenges but also the opportunities in affordable housing design.

This year’s Institute confirmed how critical early questions are to creating a quality product. Sometimes these questions are tough – do you need to find a new partner, or renegotiate, or consider a new site? In the long run, this kind of early evaluation makes for stronger projects that have anticipated challenges and are built for a site’s extended life. One design team member, Mark Ginsberg, candidly remarked that “when clients push and ask questions, architects design better buildings.” The Institute participants unanimously agreed that an investment in design during the earliest stages of development will pay off and that a little creative thinking at the outset of the project will go a long way. As one participant remarked, “it’s all about how the project begins.”

As evidenced by these lessons shared on the importance of early design, AHDLI provides a valuable educational experience for the design and development teams, as well as the dozens of observers committed to improving affordable housing design. Developers learned some of the basic principles of good design, learning how to ask the right questions and seeing the design opportunities inherent in each project. At the same time, designers began to understand the challenges that affordable housing developers face, sharing their intention to work collaboratively to solve these challenges. Jim Bernardo of Presbyterian Senior Living commented
that he shifted his learning objectives from “a focus on the project to overall education” and finally arrived at the conclusion that “you can do a good tax credit project and be creative.”

The network of professionals who are committed to raising the standard of affordable housing design continues to grow. To date, AHDLI has created a strong network of 44 developer and design alumni from across the nation, all committed to improving the quality of affordable housing. The connections made and exposure to new ideas could be the greatest outcome of the Institute. Each year, new partnerships between designers and developers emerge. The place-based developers, working deeply in their communities, have the opportunity to step out of their local and regional world. This national vantage point connects each participant to a larger network of leaders in the community development field, providing a new lens through which to evaluate their own work, garnering fresh ideas and perspectives. Each participant is encouraged to take the learnings from the Institute to advocate for design excellence, leading the way towards stronger more vibrant communities.

**INSTITUTE PROCEEDINGS**

*Design For Impact*

The Institute officially kicked off the evening of July 17 with “Design for Impact,” a keynote panel focused on the role and future of affordable housing in community development. The lecture drew more than 200 attendees who heard three invited experts present their diverse perspectives: Jonathan Rose, a well-known affordable housing developer; Jonathan Kirschenfeld, an architect of innovative single-room occupancy (SRO) buildings; and Carol Coletta, a nationally known advocate for the arts. In an open dialogue with the audience members, the three panelists discussed how creative partnerships could tie the arts to investments in housing, the need for flexible housing to accommodate shifting demographics and how housing fits within a larger puzzle of health, education and employment opportunities.

*Flip It and See If It Works*

The themes from the opening night panel continued into the following two days as the design and development teams delved into the seven development projects, looking at integrated and holistic solutions together. The work sessions were
punctuated by design team presentations highlighting best practices followed by charrettes focusing on each project. The charrettes explored design strategies such as using green roofs as community space, wayfinding for seniors with dementia, creative drainage strategies and multifunctional parking schemes. The group also confronted tough problems: satisfying difficult neighbors and the demands of tenants, building dense development in suburban contexts and the challenges of balancing residential and commercial needs.

The designers – and slowly, the developers – began to see multiple design solutions and strategies to improve each development project. During the charrette work sessions, the design team flipped site plans, broke apart buildings’ massing for increased daylight and natural ventilation and shifted the program and layout of floors throughout the buildings. Soon, at the outset of every presentation the developers began to initiate the conversation, stating “flip it, and see if it works.” In other words, don’t stop at the first design solution, but explore a series of design iterations that could work for the given program and site.

**Ask Why, Not How**
At the conclusion of the 2012 AHDLI, each participant reflected on their most significant learning moment and next steps post-Institute. The responses ranged from philosophical thoughts such as “when I start working on a ‘how’ question, I’m going to remind myself to ask the ‘why’ question” to the action-oriented commitment to create local award programs that will incentivize design excellence in affordable housing. The Pennsylvania development team upped the ante by stating that “[we] are continuing to discuss our next move. It will definitely be significant. Please know that what we learned will have a significant impact on the quality of lives of many seniors!”

**BEST PRACTICES**
To contribute to this growing community development network, the following section shares the best practices of affordable housing design as learned through the 2012 AHDLI design presentations and charrette feedback. The seven development projects in the schematic design phase – listed in Appendix A – include an array of scales, populations and phases of development. Project stages varied from preliminary site plans to fully rendered drawings and schematic program ideas with partnerships and services. Accordingly, designer insights offered both breadth and depth, ranging from questions of feasibility to site considerations and façade suggestions. Below is a summary of the top design principles shared throughout the two-day charrette sessions, beginning with broad, larger-scale strategies down to smaller design interventions.

1. Explore Creative First Steps And Interim Uses
2. Do A Neighborhood Plan
3. Take Advantage Of Natural Features
4. Treat The Site As A Campus
5. Design From The Pedestrian Point Of View
6. Reinforce Site Boundaries And Activate Key Corners
7. Respect And Enhance Historic Assets
8. Not All Floor Plans Are Created Equal
Even the smallest development project relies on successful phasing. WSFSSH is proposing a new construction addition to a site with a 1970s Section 202 building. The group came to a consensus that these two components need to be treated as one with a series of open spaces to create a unified campus. However, a more difficult decision arose: what types of open spaces would the current and future residents need and use? The participants suggested that WSFSSH create temporary, low-cost spaces to determine if a more permanent version of the space would be a good long-term investment. One participant recommended that WSFSSH build a small public plaza or temporary community garden and observe if residents or passersby start to use the space; if there is enough interest, include this in the plan for the comprehensive campus.

To move to a much larger scale, the main challenge for the Glenwood Riverpoint Place redevelopment project is the disparity of the existing conditions – an auto-centric trailer park – and the future vision with infrastructural improvements that will support a dense, walkable, mixed-use neighborhood. It could be decades before this vision comes to fruition. In the meantime, how does the development project bridge the gap and fit into the larger phasing strategy? The overwhelming feedback given to HACSA was bold: renegotiate the deal. The city’s transportation plans for this area do not support a pedestrian-friendly, mixed-use housing project. HACSA’s project is the first part of the transformation and thus, is exposed to the greatest amount of risk. The organization has the power to negotiate for a better site, roads that make sense for the development and a more incremental approach that separates the residential areas from the commercial areas.

One strategy for the incremental approach is to test programming on a small scale that will help to inform the long-term plans.
When WRRMC presented their Cedar Estate Extension project, Toni Griffin, the urban planner of the design team, asked the first question: “Where is the neighborhood plan?” This public housing revitalization project seeks to provide additional community assets while revitalizing and reconnecting the campus to the larger neighborhood. However, the goals of this larger neighborhood were unclear. If Cedar Estate is to re-knit the neighborhood together rather than create a self-enclosed housing development, it is important to provide meaningful amenities and ensure that all local partners contribute to the revision and implementation of the neighborhood plan. Services and retail in the revitalization project should serve the entire community. Similarly, residents must feel comfortable accessing adjacent amenities and services. Though no small task, WRRMC’s next step is to return to their community and try to answer some of these larger questions that will inform whether the project will include health care, a grocery store, café, day care or other social services.

AHFH faces similar decisions for the Habitat ReStore in Austin, a project that seeks to provide affordable housing adjacent to a public housing project currently under redevelopment. The group urged the organization to understand what the residents would like to see in terms of commercial amenities and housing typologies, and to be sure to avoid duplicative programming. The University Commons project in Seattle potentially faces community opposition because the project provides housing for young, homeless adults. To mitigate this opposition, it is important for LIHI to provide meaningful amenities for the surrounding community. This particular area does not have many sidewalks or sit-down cafés. The introduction of an independent coffee shop would likely be enjoyed by neighbors and passersby, strengthening the connection between this infill project, the block and the larger neighborhood.

Toni Griffin’s drawing illustrates the concept of a neighborhood plan and how WRRMC’s Cedar Estate should support and enhance the surrounding community in Cleveland. Additional text from the drawing is below.

A Unifying Community Plan
-> transitioning from enclaves to connected places
-> use civic program to create new, connecting civic places that unify people and place
At the beginning of each work session, the designers completed a quick site analysis for each project in order to highlight solar orientation, wind flow and natural features such as rivers, lakes and areas with significant vegetation. Soon after the analyses, the question was asked of several projects: “Why is the best real estate on the property – the areas with southern exposure – given to parking and not outdoor common spaces or gardens?” For PSL’s project, the group recommended that the new additions to the Easton Home campus be redesigned so that outdoor common spaces and apartment balconies face the south, thus becoming spaces that are most desirable to residents.

These analyses and comments were similar to those for AHFH and TCG’s schematic projects. The designers suggested that the Habitat ReStore buildings – currently designed as two large massings – break apart into several smaller pieces to improve access to daylight and improve ventilation throughout the site. Additionally, the residential portion of the building should be oriented toward the existing park on the site, conveniently located to the south. If the apartments open to the park, the open space asset will be used more often and can serve as a shared “backyard” for residents, a component that is frequently reserved only for suburban typologies. The residential building planned in Lyndale Gardens is adjacent to a large lake on the site, yet the current building design does not fully take advantage of this natural feature. The building massing could be arched further and articulated to expand the viewshed, increasing both the livability, and thus, each unit’s value. Another suggestion was to build a boardwalk or linear park at the lake’s edge so that residents and visitors can better engage with the important natural feature.

This sketch highlights the natural conditions of PSL’s Easton Home site that could inform the layout of the building, location of green spaces and collection of rain water. Adèle Naudés-Santos’ housing projects are largely informed by the natural features of each site. Her drawing shows how TCG’s building could be reoriented to take advantage of lake views.
Several of the development projects presented at the Institute consisted of existing buildings with planned additions to meet the housing needs of the surrounding communities. Though in radically different contexts, the organizations in rural Pennsylvania and the Bronx both faced the difficult decision of how to best enhance the entire site and provide new housing and amenities. Should the new buildings connect to the older ones or be stand-alone structures? How will the design of the new additions complement what is currently on the site? In each case, the group agreed that each site must be viewed as a comprehensive project, similar to a campus, where the buildings are complementary in program but distinct in design with common spaces and circulation patterns that knit together the diverse components. The spaces that are carved out between the older and newer buildings should be intentional and well designed so the residents living in any part of the campus can use them.

Another important idea that emerged from these discussions was that the developer should provide a new amenity or asset in the older building so that those residents do not feel excluded. The answer may be a renovated entryway or new garden area. If a new garden area is planned, it should tie into the larger plan and circulation networks throughout the site to create a “campus” feel. The landscape architect of the design resource team, Ernie Wong, highlighted the importance of outdoor spaces in these multi-building developments and provided this advice: “if you have ‘garden’ or ‘plaza’ in your project’s name, you better have a garden or plaza.”
Parking requirements vary based on a development’s location, size and type, but almost always provide a challenge to providing well-connected and vibrant pedestrian spaces. Though parking provides necessary access to amenities, the experience of the pedestrian must not be a secondary concern. Lyndale Gardens in Minneapolis is planned as a large, mixed-use project with 100 units, large-scale commercial uses, space for a Farmers Market, and other indoor and outdoor amenities. Though the ambitious project provides many spaces for residents and visitors to use, the designers agreed that parking dominated the site. The group delved into how to meet parking requirements while strengthening the pedestrian network throughout and at the heart of the site to promote walkability. The site’s primary entrypoint could be further designed as the focal point of the project, serving as a vibrant civic space that connects residential and commercial uses. If designed for the pedestrian experience, the space could enhance site lines towards the lake, enticing visitors and providing a pleasant retail experience. The lesson learned here is that although parking is necessary, catering to pedestrians to increase foot traffic is also important. Another comment on this site plan was that the residential building did not have a true front door – the entryway lacked a strong connection to the pathways and did not reflect how pedestrians would experience the site. The group suggested that the primary front door connect to meaningful community indoor and outdoor spaces and that a secondary door provide private access for residents.

Glenwood Riverpoint Place, an ambitious affordable housing project that is planned as part of a larger city-wide infrastructure project, seeks to be a pedestrian-oriented project for a town sorely in need of revitalization. It was unanimous that although the project had a design that could support the pedestrian experience, the planned arterial road improvements and parking lot at the front of the site would dominate the area, rendering any walkability features irrelevant. It is critical that the site plan is compatible with the surrounding area. Rather than planning residential uses and pedestrian spaces adjacent to vehicular traffic, these could be moved toward the site’s opposite end. A concept sketch highlights how the density should decrease from the arterial road to the river, moving residential uses and pedestrian spaces away from vehicular traffic and in locations that make sense in the larger context.

This sketch shows how TCG’s Lyndale Gardens project could better open-up and connect to the lake with a central civic plaza for pedestrians – residents and visitors alike.
This best practice was applicable to each project at the Institute, regardless of scale, context or populations served. In the case of WRRMC’s project, the designers explained how Cedar Estate Extension should create nodes of activities on the site’s edges to interact with and support surrounding neighborhood amenities, thus creating a strong program that will support the planned housing. WRRMC’s development team should evaluate how people move around the neighborhood and identify where centers of activity begin to emerge at the edge of the redevelopment site. They should locate public services, such as the community center and park space, adjacent to these centers of activity to create a stronger connection with the surrounding neighborhood.

WSFSSH’s planned development project is located on the corner of a busy intersection along a main transit corridor in Bronx, N.Y., presenting both a challenge and an opportunity. The work session takeaway was that a great deal of thought and attention should be placed on reinforcing this corner of the site where the streets meet. The corner could exist as retail or could be an outdoor space for residents to people-watch and view the action along the street. However, this semi-public space should seek to create an intimate feel and mitigate the street noise.
“The new work shall be differentiated from the old and shall be compatible with the massing, size, scale and architectural features to protect the historic integrity of the property and its environment.”

This principle, taken from the Department of Interior’s standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties, was shared with the group after the PSL team presented their Easton Home expansion project. The original Easton Home was built in 1890 and the organization is planning a new building adjacent to this prominent and important historic asset located along the main corridor of Easton, Penn. The schematic design presented at the Institute showed a new building designed to match the historic building. The designers stressed that instead, the design of the new building should be sympathetic to this building rather than a derivative, keeping with the DOI’s recommendations.

Across the country in Seattle, the University Commons project will be developed on the site adjacent to the historic Carnegie Library. In this case, the two buildings will not adjoin, but it is important that the design of this mixed-use housing complement and respect the library’s historic character. Instead of physically and programmatically turning its back on the asset, the group recommended that the site’s southeast corner of the new building open up to the library, perhaps with a café that serves as the nexus of communal space and public interface. This space will activate and reinforce the corner that faces the library, another best practice learned during the Institute.

Design team member Mark Ginsberg, presented Castle Gardens, a 114 unit supportive and affordable housing project designed to respect the Fortune Society’s historic “castle”. The modern addition differentiates itself from the old building and highlights the original brick wall.

Schematic drawing for PSL’s Easton Home by design team member, Bryan Bell, highlighting best practices in historic design standards.

Design team member Adele Nadue Santos’ suggested redesign of LIHI’s University Commons. The common space could be moved to the other side of the building to take advantage of the adjacent, historic public library.
Not all floor plans are created equal. The design team members urged several developers to rethink the floorplans of their projects and reject the institutional, windowless, double-loaded corridor flanked with monotonous units. Hallways are not obligated to have the same unit layout throughout and across each floor of the building. Windows at the ends of hallways can be added to increase natural light. If floor plans are approached in a creative way, units can vary in layout and be used to articulate the façade to provide views to the outside. In the case of PSL’s Easton Home, planned for residents with dementia, the group emphasized that the floor plan should support best practices of memory care. Natural light indicates the passage of time, a concept often difficult to grasp for this population. Therefore, it’s important that hallways and common spaces have access to natural light. One team member suggested that the hallway could serve as a “memory museum” – a place where residents and family members decorate walls with personal memorabilia such as art and photos – to trigger past memories and experiences.

Lastly, each floor should provide spaces for different activities, creating a clear hierarchy of community spaces throughout the building. In several of the projects, each floor contained a generic community room at the end of each hallway, all similar in size. Instead, each community room should be planned for a specific program to support resident needs to ensure that the room will not be under-utilized. Furthermore, the design and program of the spaces should support each other. For LIHI’s University Commons, the group recommended moving the laundry room – a much-used amenity – from the nook at the end of each hallway to a central place with natural light that residents will want to occupy for longer periods of time and socialize.

Drawing for PSL’s Easton Home project highlighting how the corridor could be improved:

- Longer, thinner units, some smaller
- Try for single-loaded corridor
- Align courtyard with adjacent, existing building
- Move community space to center so that units are closer to it and the corridor is shorter
APPENDIX A: 2012 AHDLI PARTICIPANTS

DEVELOPMENT RESOURCE TEAM MEMBERS AND PROJECTS

EASTON, PA  
James Bernardo Presbyterian Senior Living (PSL)  
Easton Home new construction addition to existing senior housing for dementia patients

CLEVELAND, OH  
Donovan Duncan Western Reserve Revitalization Management Company (WRRMC)  
Cedar Estate Extension new construction/rehabilitation, Choice Neighborhoods revitalization

GLENOUD, OR  
Betsy Hunter Housing and Community Services Agency of Lane County (HACSA)  
Glenwood Riverpoint Place new construction, mixed-use housing neighborhood revitalization

SEATTLE, WA  
Sharon Lee Low Income Housing Institute (LIHI)  
University Commons new construction, urban infill housing for homeless youth

MINN., MN  
Beth Pfiefer The Cornerstone Group  
Lyndale Gardens new construction, mixed-use housing with flexible outdoor programming

AUSTIN, TX  
Kelly Weiss Austin Habitat for Humanity (AHFH)  
Habitat Restore new construction, multifamily, mixed-use housing within a TOD zone

BRONX, NY  
Laura Tavormina West Side Federation of Senior and Supportive Housing (WSFSSH)  
Tres Puentes new construction/rehabilitation of a Section 202 senior housing project

DESIGN RESOURCE TEAM MEMBERS

RALEIGH, NC  
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Mark Ginsberg Founding Partner, Curtis and Ginsberg Architects LLP

NEW YORK, NY  
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NEW YORK, NY  
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SYRACUSE, NY  
Marc Norman Director, Upstate: Center for Design, Research and Real Estate, Syracuse University

CAMBRIDGE, MA  
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CHICAGO, IL  
Ernie Wong Founding Principle and President, Site Design Group Ltd.

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