THE 2013 AFFORDABLE HOUSING DESIGN LEADERSHIP INSTITUTE
REPORT
July 23-25, 2013
Hosted by Cannon Design, Chicago, IL
An Enterprise Design Initiative, 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 in community design. The goal of the Institute is to improve upon the design practices in the affordable housing arena and raise development leaders’ capacity to produce more livable and sustainable housing for low-income people living in the United States.

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A small idea can grow into something that really bears fruit and if good enough, it can inspire people to change – to change the way that they think, the way that they act, the way that they dream, and ultimately provide better solutions for the people that they’re going to serve.

Clockwise from top left: Michigan Avenue from the Cannon Design office; Matt Urbanski explaining his drawing; Sol Flores during the workshop sessions; Rose Olson, Amit Price Patel and Peter Landon listening to the session presentations; 2013 Design and Development team members with Enterprise staff.

Quote by Robert Ivy, Executive Vice President/CEO of the AIA, 2013 Keynote Speaker.
What is the role of architecture in affecting the human psyche, human health, human well being? Can design make changes that are beneficial for the individual citizen who gets to live in such a place, for the street that they live on and the neighborhood that they will inhabit?
Enterprise convened the fourth annual Affordable Housing Design Leadership Institute (AHDLI) in Chicago from July 23-25th, 2013. Hosted by Cannon Design, this three-day event explored the role of design in the affordable housing field through the lens of seven development projects and intensive dialogue between community developers and architects.

The Institute kicked-off with “The Multiplier Effect of Design,” a keynote lecture led by Robert Ivy, the Executive Vice President and CEO of the American Institute of Architects (AIA). The lecture drew 170 attendees and featured the 2013 winners of the AIA/HUD Secretary’s Award for Design Excellence in Affordable Housing and the Richard H. Driehaus Award for Architectural Excellence in Community Design. Together, the panelists and audience explored how design can contribute to improved health outcomes and stronger neighborhoods.

The theme of “The Multiplier Effect of Design” permeated throughout the charrette sessions over the next two days. The Institute engaged more than 50 individuals – design and development resource teams and session observers from Chicago and across the country – in this important dialogue. Partnering the place-based, people-first perspectives of community developers with the innovative and diverse talents of designers, the participants came together to look at holistic solutions for the seven development projects.

After the first development team members presented Rose Olson’s schematic project, the group discovered several physical constraints - zoning and existing infrastructure - that may not be as fixed as her team thought. As a participant commented, “make sure you’re not working with the wrong set of rules.” This mantra allowed the group to brainstorm new and creative solutions; suggesting to move the entry to the parking lot and changing the site design to be more pedestrian friendly. Another lesson about important first steps came from Patricia Saldaña Natke, a design team member, who stressed the importance of asset mapping. This process encouraged the team to step back and look at the neighborhood’s needs, vision and context before jumping to site and building 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 and educating participants. The Institute initiates an open conversation not only about the challenges but also the opportunities to use design to leverage investments in affordable housing. This learning and network building will continue with the fifth annual AHDLI to be held in 2014.

The following section shares the lessons learned through the 2013 AHDLI design presentations and charrette feedback. The seven development projects included senior affordable housing in suburban Pennsylvania, supportive housing in Chicago and rehabilitation of a historic high-rise in New Orleans. Project stages varied from preliminary site plans to fully rendered drawings. Accordingly, designer insights offered both breadth and depth, ranging from questions of feasibility to site considerations and façade suggestions. The following pages present the top design principles shared throughout the two-day charrette sessions.
‘Good Design Doesn’t Cost, It Pays’
This quote, attributed to the architect Richard H. Driehaus, reflected much of the conversation at the keynote lecture and charrette sessions. Richard Sciortino, one of the design team members who is a developer in Chicago, uses his portfolio of quality, well-designed buildings to define his business and attract talent. “If you have a beautiful project, you don’t have to say anything; you just have to show it” he explained. Furthermore, a beautiful building that residents respect will be safe and well-maintained, an outcome that will foster goodwill and satisfy the interests of investors and politicians.

More specifically, when developing the building plan, it is important to think about design as a marketing tool, creating a program that capitalizes on views. For example, for the Chicago senior housing project addressing a range of resident needs, the group suggested that the developer place independent living and community amenities on higher floors with ample views and light. Whether it’s a portfolio-wide commitment to quality, use of unique exterior materials or attention to providing access to natural light, everyone agreed that good design attracts people like a sign; it’s something that people want.

Choose One Thing and Do it Right
Community developers are often tasked with implementing so many needs in one housing development, all within a difficult financing and political framework, that being successful in every facet of the project isn’t attainable. La Casa Norte’s Executive Director, Sol Flores, presented their mixed-use, supportive housing project that will also house their organizations offices. Though all uses seemed important, the group advised her to prioritize the programming, determine what is most mission-critical and put the financing and creative energy into that use.

During the feedback portion of Wishrock Investment Group’s project, a rehabilitation of a several hundred unit HUD public housing development, the group commented that since the campus’ community center was recently renovated, they should focus on landscape improvements and a circulation system around this existing asset. Pedestrian pathways can bring an identity to the neighborhood, strengthen the relationship between buildings and increase social activity on the site. This initial pathway and landscape plan could be combined with a resident engagement program, phased over five years to include a horticulture program, series of fitness areas, or passive recreation spaces.

Make the Front Door the ‘Handshake’
Lawndale Christian Development Corporation presented a senior housing project that seeks to bridge the local African American and Latino communities of North and South Lawndale in Chicago. The group agreed that the design of the building should embody this strong conceptual vision for the project. The corner of the building could serve a civic function, bringing the two cultures together. The front entry should be inviting, symbolizing that all people are welcome to enter. Use glass, create an ample lobby and experiment with unique materials for this part of the building.

Renaissance Neighborhood Development Corporation’s 1100 Tulane project showed
schematic floor plans for a 1920’s high-rise office building in New Orleans to be converted into a modern residential complex. After looking at the new floor layouts and common spaces, one of the participants asked “what is the handshake of the building?” A lesson learned from the presentation of design team member Amit Price Patel, this participant emphasized the importance of a front entry that has a strong design identity. This will anchor the corner and make the building approachable and interesting from the level that most people experience it, the street.

Prioritize Common Spaces
Prioritizing community space over private space delivers a strong message of the importance of community within any housing development. In several instances during the reviews, the design team emphasized the importance of a grand entry that leads to a ground floor community space that is beautiful and functional. For Presbyterian Senior Care, this attention to common spaces became even more critical as they serve seniors, a population who spends a vast majority of their time around the property and has frequent family visitors. The front lobby and other small public spaces become prime spots for socialization and thus, should be designed with intention. One participant commented that the stairs could be made more prominent and flow into the ground floor entryways, facilitating more interaction in these often underutilized spaces. Attention to interior design qualities such as lighting, both natural and artificial, and comfortable furnishings will make these spaces more desirable.

The architects of the group commented that the quality of common spaces is worth spending time and money on. Matt Urbanski, the landscape architect of the group, commented that landscape is a cheap way to create character for common spaces and is especially important for the projects with a campus-like setting. He talked about the power of imaginative landscape, outdoor places that bring people together, create chance encounters and bring nature to urban dwellers. Urbanski stressed the importance of viewing playgrounds as more than pieces of play equipment fenced into a small area. Playgrounds are more successful when viewed as “playscapes.” Playscapes incorporate nature and are comfortable not only for kids, but adults as well.

Connect the Indoors and Outdoors
Given the current market’s heightened demand for green buildings with access to natural light, fresh air and gardens, a strong connection between the indoors and outdoors is increasingly important. The Institute’s design team encouraged CommonBond to alter their building design so that the community room opens directly into the garden plots. This will facilitate more interaction between the building interior and planned outdoor spaces that reference the surrounding agricultural context of rural Minnesota. Lawndale Christian Development Corporation presented a similar scheme, a parking lot planned on the rear of their building in Chicago. The group suggested that this parking lot be moved to allow the landscape to interface with the building.

Presbyterian Senior Living presented a project with a strong concept of “the crescent,” which was taken from a canticle referencing the sun and moon of St. Francis of Assisi. This concept was manifested in a small garden on the backside of
the building. Rather than keep this symbolism within a small designated space, the group suggested that it continue through the building and outward to the larger, pastoral site. By blurring the lines between inside and out, residents and visitors can experience the assets of this planned development. This could be a sequence of design features that draws people into the building and then continues on an outdoor path so that people meander around the site, encouraging physical activity for residents and visitors alike.

**Engage Residents**
One conversation that continued throughout the Institute was the importance placed upon the perspective of the resident. Wishrock Investment Group is tasked with rehabilitating a 290 unit HUD project built in the mid 1970’s that provides housing to people earning less than 80% of area median income. Their first step is to address physical issues that are leading to high, recurring maintenance costs. Wishrock’s development lead stated their commitment to engaging residents in the design process of this rehabilitation effort. Institute participants also expressed the importance of this endeavor.

For projects like this to be catalytic, it is critical to elevate the social element. This social focus will make the project’s physical and economic aspects better. Often, the process of engagement is a victory in and of itself because most people living in these types of housing projects are never asked their opinions. The group suggested that when looking at the upgrades in the buildings and landscapes, Wishrock listen to the residents and determine if there’s a sense of identity associated with certain places within the property and invest in design features that enhance this identity. Rather than choose homogenous features, find out what design aesthetics resonate with residents, and use that to inform the redesign.

Ultimately, when residents understand that the developer is approachable and will listen, they will help to influence local leadership and assist with getting approval letters. Wishrock’s commitment to listening to the residents will ensure a better long-term project. As one participant commented, “people will always choose to be in that property if it reflects the needs of their family and feel that they are part of the surrounding neighborhood.”

**Address the Street**
This key tenant of good urban design became a topic of conversation throughout several of the projects critiqued during the Institute’s charrette sessions. The group commented that CommonBond’s Hermes Apartments building almost turns its back on the street, a street that provides transit connections to downtown and views to the surrounding agricultural fields. The group suggested that a prominent entrance be added on the front side, rather than just at the rear near the parking lot. Furthermore, this entrance could provide views towards the courtyard, highlighting Hermes Apartments’ amenities.

La Casa Norte’s Pierce House is an urban infill building in Chicago. Though the design of the building is critical, they should not lose sight that there is an opportunity to enhance the streetscape as they redevelop this parcel. The group urged La Casa to think about the sidewalk as being a part of the building, helping to create an identity for the whole block.
Prioritize Common Spaces + Address the Street
This drawing shows how CommonBond’s building could be redesigned with a prominent entry (top right) that connects to the common spaces and “backyard.” With this redesign, the building addresses the street more directly and provides visibility and connectivity to the common spaces.

Connect the Indoors and Outdoors
The three “joints” on Presbyterian Senior Care’s building, highlighted in green, could serve as the connections between interior and exterior spaces by adding glazing and additional entries. This will also provide more articulation along the facade, as the sketch at the bottom shows.
Engage Residents

This drawing shows a conceptual plan for Wishrock Investment Group’s housing complex with active and passive recreation spaces. During the rehabilitation of this existing 576 unit development project, Wishrock could invest in enhancing the identity of outdoor spaces. The Institute participants suggested that the developer could give surveys to current residents to determine which areas are currently used and what other types of spaces are desired.

Make the Front Door the ‘Handshake’

Amit Price Patel presented the work of his firm, David Baker Architects, showing their attention to the design quality of front entries (left). The diagram above shows how La Casa Norte’s building could have a more public entry, in yellow, and a private entry for residents.
ENTERPRISE COMMUNITY PARTNERS
Enterprise is a national nonprofit with more than 30 years of experience in the community development and affordable housing field. At Enterprise, we create opportunity for low- and moderate-income people through affordable housing and diverse, thriving communities. We are committed to giving people living in poverty an opportunity to move up and out. We believe that these opportunities are best provided in communities with a diverse mix of affordable and market housing options, access to jobs and social supports, and a strong commitment to the environment and civic participation.

ENTERPRISE DESIGN INITIATIVES
Our mission is to improve people’s lives by integrating intentional, functional and inspiring design into affordable housing to create stronger, thriving communities.

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