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# Making Housing Home

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Photos by Gabrielle Bendiner-Viani



*How comfortable can you get?  
I've been in this country all my  
life—I came here when I was  
twelve—and I walk in here,  
and I'm home. — Tony*

Markets and policies produce units of housing that are only made into “homes” as lives are lived in them. For those with adequate resources, housing becomes home through a process of exercising choice in the market, buying goods and services to augment one’s own labor, and making personal and emotional investments. For poor families, the struggle for both housing and home is a difficult one. Yet, in all kinds of housing, residents work to keep their families healthy, educate their children, and live what they and society deem good and productive lives.<sup>1</sup>

Through narratives and photographs, this article considers how housing provided to low-income families in two different eras in the United States were more than simple economic commodities, as they strove to support lives and carry forward a broad social commitment.<sup>2</sup> It explores how people have created “home” in two unusual, humane and progressive affordable-housing developments: Marcus Garvey Village in Brownsville, Brooklyn (opened in 1975); and Urban Horizons in the South Bronx (opened in 1997).

In our efforts to understand how designed space can aid in the making of personal place, we asked residents for tours of their apartments, listened to their narratives, and photographed the spaces in which they felt most at

home. In the process, we were able to see how the grand structures of architecture, politics, and social commitment filter down to the detailed level of everyday experience.

## **Housing that Supports**

The strengths and weaknesses of Marcus Garvey Village and Urban Horizons are interwoven with the decrease in public commitment to social housing over the past three decades in the U.S. Yet, social housers have also learned positive lessons about the need to supply more than housing if poor families are to flourish and improve their economic standing from one generation to the next. These changes are nowhere more evident than in the scale of effort reflected by these two projects. Today,



at Urban Horizons, the Women’s Housing and Economic Development Corporation (WHEDCO), a private nonprofit agency, has been able to maintain high standards in an individual building. Yet, thirty years ago, with projects like Marcus Garvey Village, the New York State Urban Development Corporation (UDC) once sought to change the landscape of housing in an entire state.

At Marcus Garvey Village (MGV), Ethel, a grandmother in her late sixties, shared with us the “living fabric” of the home she has lived in since MGV first opened in 1975. To her, the development is a “great place,” which has gone downhill due to poor management. When it was new, MGV reflected a major social commitment to improving housing

for people of low income. Responding to the urban upheavals of the 1960s, the UDC set out to define criteria for “good” housing and built 33,000 units of it in New York State. Between 1968 and 1975, this state entity worked at a scale and pace not equaled since, and its radical effort to improve public housing design so residents might thrive was considered a national model.

MGV was one of the UDC’s last projects. Designed by architect Kenneth Frampton and the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies, it followed a “low-rise, high-density” prototype for family infill housing, incorporating in-block mews and private front doors for each apartment.<sup>3</sup>

In the thirty years she’s lived at MGV, Ethel has raised seven children and eighteen grandchildren in her

three-bedroom apartment. During that time, the development, neighborhood, and political climate have all changed. In particular, just after MGV opened, the UDC itself was disbanded due to political and financial crises. As a more conservative political climate set in and responsibility for housing devolved to the private sector, the quality of management and main-

**Opposite:** Marcus Garvey Village, Brownsville, Brooklyn, New York. Developer: New York State Urban Development Corporation. Designed by the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies. Opened in 1975.

**Above:** Urban Horizons, South Bronx, New York. Developer: Women’s Housing and Economic Development Corporation. Designed by Becker & Becker. Opened in 1997.



tenance suffered. The surrounding Brownsville neighborhood, densely residential and primarily African American, also declined as a result of continued patterns of economic and social disinvestment.

In praise of the design of MGV, one resident said she thought the architects had built the duplex apartments for “rich people.” Yet she also implied the challenges of life in Brownsville have been quite different from the life the designers imagined. “They thought there would be no crimes—they never thought people would do that. They thought there’d be no illegal transactions.” For example, the mews, planned as communal spaces of play and engagement, were difficult to police during the drug epidemic of the late 1970s and 80s. During that time, they often became spaces of gunplay, drug deals, and gang activity.<sup>4</sup>

Changes in financing, ownership and management have also had a deleterious effect on the quality of life in the buildings. There have been

patches, but never a sustained effort to maintain and repair the physical and social infrastructure. As Ethel sums it up:

*Oh, it could be nice. It was so nice. For example, the lighting was different when I first moved here—but then they put another kind of lights, talking about how they were saving saving, saving.... And they only made it worse! But, management don’t live here, so they don’t give a kitty.*

By the 1980s and 90s, the social commitment that had given rise to MGV was replaced by a rhetoric of smaller government and a new emphasis on the private sector to voluntarily provide for “the deserving poor.” Gone was any broad consensus for the use of public money to improve the life chances of those with few resources.

Reliance on the private market eventually led to an increase in U.S. housing standards. But it brought high persistent rates of homelessness, and led to income stagnation for the

lower one-third to one-half of the population. The housing crisis faced by low-income (especially minority) Americans persisted in a new guise.<sup>5</sup>

As responsibility shifted away from the state, a new model for building low-income housing emerged. It involved the activities of private non-profit agencies like WHEDCO. As is clear from the stories told by Tony, Isaura and Norma, residents of Urban Horizons, in the best of cases these activities have continued the former UDC commitment to housing that supports its residents’ lives.

The eleven-story Neo-Renaissance building occupied by Urban Horizons typifies these efforts. Located in a primarily Latino South Bronx neighborhood, it originally served as the Morrisania Hospital. In 1976, in the midst of the fiscal crisis partially responsible for the UDC’s demise, New York City closed the hospital. The building then sat derelict for twenty years, a towering symbol of the larger abandonment of the South Bronx.

The gutting, rehabilitation and res-



toration of the old hospital for Urban Horizons followed a design by the architecture firm of Becker + Becker. It involved tax-credit financing, durable materials, and a belief that beauty must play a role in all housing. Its 132 units have 50 unique floor plans and original high ceilings, and its ground floor houses social services for the entire community.

**The Struggle for Better Lives**

Residents of both developments appreciate the life improvements these buildings have enabled. At the well-maintained Urban Horizons, Isaura, a spare, sweetly careful middle-aged woman, sits at the table in her light-filled, immaculate studio apartment, explaining how little good her efforts were in her previous apartment, and her relief at the feeling of safety she now enjoys.

*I lived in a terrible place. Was just like hell. I couldn't sleep—roaches were all over the ceiling, falling down on my bed. I woke up in the middle of the night, and my bed was full of roaches.*

*But this house is a blessing. By the Lord God to me. I think it's a glory. Compare it to the place I lived before! I open the window, the sun comes through the house, and I see the blessing.*

Ethel's home at MGV is also welcoming, comfortable and enveloping. Entering through her own front door, Ethel's house truly seems her own.

*I'm going to tell you—I really like it here. You couldn't really ask for no more than it kind of being like being in your own home, because you come in, you don't have to go in no hallways or anything like that. I come in my own door, I don't have to bother with no one, I get in my car, I go, I come, the yard is there for the kids—so I love that part about it.*

Yet, Ethel can't ignore the crime in Brownsville and her problems with management. Specifically, she cites the installation of a security camera on one side of the building, so that crime

simply migrated to the other. Health is also deeply compromised at Ethel's neighbor's house. One bedroom is closed off, due to water damage management has never fixed. The room is full of ruined furniture, while potentially dangerous mold grows down the walls, breeding a deep sense of insecurity among residents.

Though now of different ages, Ethel at MGV and Norma, a single mother of two at Urban Horizons, came to their buildings at times in their lives when both were actively involved in raising their children. Their work to make stable homes for their families is central to their engagement with society. Each has made enormous efforts to obtain education (for themselves and their children), and each has created space for learning within their homes.

**Opposite and above, left to right:** Isaura's table; Ethel's living room; Ethel's dining table; Norma's living room table.



Ethel describes her home as a sanctum, a place where she can keep her children close to her.

*When I moved here, I only had four kids that were still young. They fared very well, because I don't let my kids just run out in the street, OK? You come from school, you do your homework. I raised six of my grandchildren, and out of those, two finished college so far. The oldest one in the house now is away at school, so I just have the one fourteen and one thirteen now living with me every-day—but lots of the other grans stay here now and again.*

Norma moved to Urban Horizons from a homeless shelter. She explains how deeply the physical space of the apartment is intertwined with her goals for her children.

**Opposite and above, Left to right:** Norma's living room table; Norma's bedroom; Norma's very organized kitchen.

*My daughter's drawings are incredible. And my son wants to be an architect. His school is very good, so now he gets free classes of art on Saturdays. I had my daughter when I was so young—although I never missed teacher's conferences with her, and always motivated and praised her to do whatever she wanted, with my son, I'm doing things a little differently, because I knew my daughter had talent, but I wasn't educated about what to do—and I was so young—but I'm learning. So with Marcos, I go to Barnes and Noble, I buy him an architecture book. It was expensive, but he wants to look at different ideas, so I'm trying to help him. To help them, it's a process, and to motivate them, it's important, and that's why I always keep my home like this, because I think it helps the child want to do other things, bigger things and better things, and feel comfortable and feel free.*

This space isn't only for her children. She explains how it has also allowed her to invest in herself. "I feel calm here, I feel at ease, I could think better, analyze...." Indeed, when the photographs accompanying this article were first exhibited, Norma sent a letter apologizing for not being able to attend the opening: her new stability had enabled her to return to college part-time, and the date conflicted with her first class.

Well-designed buildings can also support educational aspirations directly. At a panel discussion led by the chief architect for the UDC, one member of the audience stood up to say he had become an architect because he grew up at Marcus Garvey. Perhaps one day Norma's son Marcos, growing up at Urban Horizons, will follow a similar path.

While the association between poor-quality housing and poor mental health has been well-documented, the reverse also holds.<sup>6</sup> When poor families move to better housing, the mental and physical health of mothers



improves, and parenting becomes less restrictive and more supportive of exploration.<sup>7</sup> And when parents escape from poverty, even temporarily, they invest more time and money in their home environments.<sup>8</sup>

Such investments pay off by supporting their children's intellectual and emotional development. Norma eloquently explains the positive role her apartment plays in her life with her children, and how this entwines with her own sense of fulfillment.

*This is just me. I love this, I love cleanliness. I didn't have this! Little by little, I've gotten this. I made all this happen for me. This is my space, this is my home. This is where I'm nourishing my children. So it's important to me, my environment here. This is my kitchen. It's small, but I put in so much love toward what I do when I cook. The house reflects the person I am. I always keep everything clean, always, always, always.*

Yet, for Ethel, in her “house-shaped” home at Marcus Garvey, crowding is still a reality. Dinners prepared there are served to many more than sleep in her three bedrooms. And her dining and living rooms feel cramped for this “extended family.” Nevertheless, the family is extremely close, and Ethel revels in its size and her role as matriarch.

*It's a lot of family, and we spend our time together. We are the Kennedys, OK? Not quite as bad as the things they did, but... I value family! Everyone comes over here. But my dining room, when we're eating together, on Thanksgiving or any other day—it's just got no space. A lot of people have smaller tables—but I'm used to my big table, because I got a big family, you know? It means something to me to have a little space.*

The determined efforts made by these two parents, and others like

them, in terms of education and family stability have the potential to break the intergenerational reproduction of poverty. When parents can make home in a good way, they are better able to make the next generation in a good way.

### **The World beyond the Home**

Both Marcus Garvey Village and Urban Horizons were thoughtfully designed to try to expand their residents' sense of home and support beyond their doorsteps. Yet, the social conditions of the communities in which they are located have often worked to limit such an expansion of spaces of safety. As one resident who grew up at MGCV explained, “We used to play outside on the streets and in the mews with no one watching us except from the windows. Now no one considers doing that.”

Rather, Ethel's MGCV backyard is the primary place for her family's play. She continually reworks this malleable space to create a place for herself and her family.



*The weather is just changing and we haven't done anything back here yet, but I've changed the yard around many times; I bought a swimming pool for the backyard—at least I had space for something! I didn't care for the public pools. I got eighteen grandchildren, and I always had them play out here in my yard.*

As she described that swimming pool, Ethel's voice relaxed, explaining that while it originally served to keep the kids happy and close to home, she too can sometimes be found out there on the hottest days of the New York City summer, blissfully floating in the dark until 2 or 3 AM.

At Urban Horizons, play can take place in outdoor common areas. This is how Tony, an older disabled man with a young son, explains his experience of "eyes on the street."

*See, here I have everything. I have a nice view, see? You could take a look.... My kid goes out, I watch him through here. If he wants something, he just calls, Papa! You know? It's nice. I mean, don't you like to be in your room?"*

But such a sense of safety may owe as much to the wide-ranging efforts of WHEDCO to improve the surrounding community and help neighbors, as to the design of Urban Horizons.

### A Place in Society

The efforts residents make to build home are part of their work as citizens and participants in a collective society. But thoughtful housing designs can signal the respect of those with greater resources, giving the people who live there a sense that they have a "seat at the table" of the American dream. At Urban Horizons, Tony exclaims:

*To be honest, when I saw this apartment, I flipped! I mean, the design! You ever seen a ceiling like that? The windows! Incredible. The people that fixed this building, they really did a hell of a good job.*

In forming a connection with this building, residents also build a community they all want to protect. Uncategorically, they title it "our

building." These relationships of trust and mutual responsibility are at the core of a functioning civil society, supporting the development of the social capital that allows residents to both "get along and get ahead."<sup>9</sup>

A place in society also enables people to make valued contributions to inhabited space. For example, the residents of Urban Horizons are technically not allowed to make alterations to their apartments. However, when building managers arrived to clean one vacated studio apartment, they found that the departing tenant had divided it in half with a wall to make separate spaces for himself and his young son. The wall could have blocked the light from the apartment's main window. Yet, he had placed a large square of glass bricks in its center so that the entire apartment was still filled with sunlight—a strategy also employed in some of the building's common spaces. The job had been done with such care that the management let the modification remain.

While a physical environment can support or impede the struggle for positive sense of self, family and citizenship, it cannot bring these qualities by itself. For Ethel, political agency must also be involved. However, empowerment in decisions concerning living environments has been elusive at MGCV. For years, a management company has run its tenants' association, stifling dissent and undermining this important organizing tool.

Ethel has worked to reclaim the tenants' association, trying to encourage commitment among other residents. As she explains, "there are a lot of people here as long as me, and they're good people, very nice people."



### An Intergenerational Effort

Concerns for crime, low educational achievement, and the cost of health care illustrate how a failure to provide for the needs of those with few resources undermines everyone's collective future. Projects such as MGV and Urban Horizons show the importance of a social vision that includes good housing for all. Providing such space and treating people with dignity allows them to join society as valued members according to a social contract that holds for the long term.

Such a policy will ultimately require sustained state engagement, however, so that good programs can evolve and grow. Locally based, stable nonprofits are also important as repositories of knowledge about a community's strengths and needs. Lastly, caring individuals are part of an intergenerational solution. By creating supportive homes, Ethel, Isaura, Norma and Tony are giving their children the chance to contribute to successful new communities over the next fifty years.

WHEDCO's director believes the apartments at Urban Horizons should be the kind of place she would want to live and raise a family. Public opinion and policy have increasingly lost sight of this basic insight. However, looking at the experience of those who live in these two developments should encourage a reopening of discussion on the costs and benefits of housing that can become home, and the vision of society that motivates our choices.

#### Notes

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**Opposite:** Ethel's backyard.

**Above:** View from Tony's window.