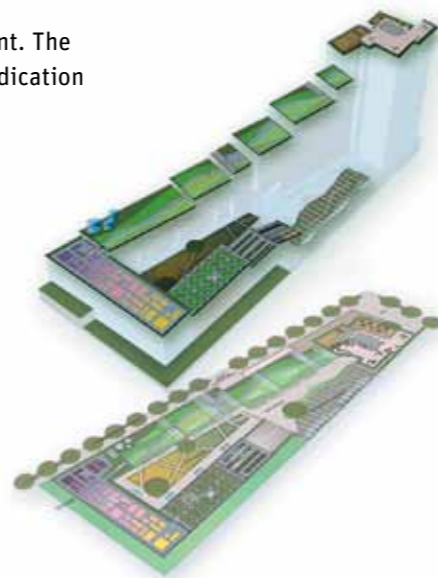




Via Verde: Replicable Model or Singular Success?

In the Bronx, **Dattner Architects** and **Grimshaw Architects** have designed a much-noted housing development. The unusual design competition process and the innovative architectural solutions could prompt a renewed dedication to the unglamorous field of affordable housing.

Text **Karen Kubey**



Even before a single resident has moved in, Via Verde in the South Bronx is already a hit with the media and elected officials. New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg called the project “one the most environmentally advanced affordable housing developments in the nation,” while architectural critic Michael Kimmelman made Via Verde the subject of his front-page, New York Times debut, writing that the development “makes as good an argument as any new building in the city for the cultural and civic value of architecture.” The South Bronx has been a site of intense development for the last two decades, largely with new low- and middle-income housing, in efforts to revitalize a borough that was devastated by building fires and abandonment in the 1970s. The area known as Melrose Commons is once again a dense neighborhood (page 15).

The 222-unit Via Verde is the result of the 2006 “New Housing New York (NHNY) Legacy Project” competition. Co-sponsored by the American Institute of Architects New York Chapter and the New York City Department of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD), the competition’s explicit challenge was to create housing that would be “affordable, sustainable, and replicable.” A team comprising the New York architectural firms Dattner and Grimshaw, with the for-profit affordable housing developer Jonathan Rose Companies, and New York City’s oldest non-profit housing developer, Phipps Houses, won the competition. The team combined standard construction methods with a sophisticated façade system, innovative apartment layouts, and extensive green elements, rising to the competition challenge.

Ascending the Green Way

Via Verde’s dramatically stepped form, along with the sharp lines of its prefabricated façade, complement the range of building types in the area. Rising south-to-north from three-story townhouses to a 20-story tower, Via Verde wraps around the edges of its narrow, triangular site, forming an intimate courtyard and maximizing sun exposure. The name Via Verde, or “Green Way,” refers to the project’s system of planted roofs. Starting at the courtyard amphitheater, residents will climb to the roofs, spiraling up through plantings of conifers, an orchard, and resident gardening plots, finally arriving at a “fitness roof,” with a covered terrace for exercise classes, opening into an indoor fitness center. Via Verde also incorporates a ground-floor health clinic and has become a test case for New York City’s Active Design Guidelines, adopted in 2010, promoting healthful living through architectural features like inviting, open stairs as an alternative to the elevator. Via Verde’s emphasis on healthy living expands the concept of “green” building.

The designers of Via Verde deviated from tried-and-true efficient unit layouts, creating instead more livable apartments that revive historical experiments in housing. While mid-rise housing in New York is typically 60 feet (18.30 m) deep, with double-loaded corridors, Via Verde’s depth at its mid-rise section is an unheard-of 47’-6” (14.50 m). The

building’s most innovative units are the two-story, two-bedroom units in the mid-rise section along Brook Avenue. Double-loaded corridors, located on every other floor, provide access to the lower level of each unit, whose upper, floor-through level allows for cross-ventilation and incorporates courtyard-side balconies, rare in medium-income housing. In the building’s southern section there are two-story townhouses with private gardens and up to three one-story, floor-through apartments above, accessed by exterior stairways, elevator-free. Ground-floor, live-work units line the site’s Brook Avenue edge. The tower provides studios to three-bedroom units, oriented about a double-loaded corridor, with every living room incorporating a corner window. All residents will access the building via a Brook Avenue entrance to the courtyard, activating the semi-public space.

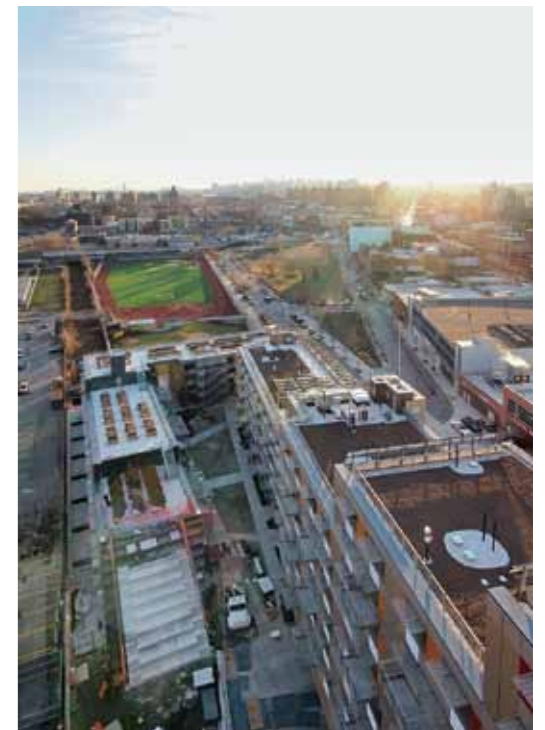
Government Support

In addition to Via Verde’s extraordinary design, the project boasts quantifiable benefits in affordability and sustainability. Prices for the project’s 151 rental apartments are set for households making 30 to 60 percent of the Area Median Income (AMI), which is currently between \$24,000 and \$48,000 annually for a family of four; the monthly rent for a two-bedroom unit is \$942. The 71 co-ops are priced for those making 70 to 100 percent of the AMI, with the purchase cost for a two-bedroom apartment beginning at \$146,000. The design team estimates that the building will be over 30 percent more energy efficient than standard housing developments. Via Verde’s waitlist—7500 applicants for the 151 rental apartments—says more about the lack of affordable housing in New York, unfortunately, than it does about the specific project.

The quality does come at a cost. The building’s developers estimate that the \$100 million project, at \$236 per square foot (\$2,600/m²), cost five percent more to construct than a typical affordable housing project would have, with cast-in-place tower construction and remediation of the brownfield site accounting for most of the extra expense. Via Verde’s architectural achievements were possible only because of extensive governmental support, not only through funding, but also in terms of regulatory exceptions: a mayoral override exempted the project from having to provide car parking, typically a major expense in housing development. The comparably higher costs are the cause for some criticism. “You could make anything affordable with enough subsidies,” said Jerilyn Perine,

View of Via Verde from the south; to the right, a 1970s public housing project as well as a school. Below: View from the tower across the roof terraces toward Manhattan.

Axonometric view: Architects Photos: Robert Garneau/Phipps, Rose, Dattner, Grimshaw





View from the east: The façade was assembled from pre-fabricated panels complete with sunshades and balconies. The materials include wood, cement, and aluminum.

Ground floor and fourth floor plans, building section at scale 1:1000 (1"=80')

executive director of the Citizens Housing and Planning Council and former commissioner of HPD. "Via Verde is like the High Line. These things are great for what they are, but they are not good public policy models because they are too expensive to do again. The challenge of government is to spend the least and get the most." Other experts point to the fact that housing, inherently expensive to construct, must be publicly subsidized to remain affordable for residents. As New York City Department of Design and Construction commissioner and NHNY juror David Burney put it recently, "Design is not the obstacle. It's the way we deliver housing that's the problem. The rest of the world does it with central government financing. If we can spend 10 billion a month on wars, we can get a little bit back and spend it on housing."

Learning from Via Verde

Via Verde emerged from a unique selection process: initiated and organized by the New Housing New York Steering Committee, an independent group of architects, developers, and City representatives, NHNY was an open, two-stage competition for architect-developer teams. 32 teams from around the world submitted responses to the first-phase request for qualifications, of which five were awarded stipends and invited to submit full design and development proposals. An independent jury used weighted evaluation criteria, with 30 percent each for "innovative design" and "economic feasibility," 20 percent for "green building," and 10 percent each for "replicability" and "team experience," placing a much higher value on design than typical in affordable housing. Rick Bell, executive director of the AIANY, highlighted the importance of the "combination, from the outset, of the design and development teams sharing linked goals of building affordable housing that is emphatically green."

Can NHNY's results be replicated? Architect and compe-

tion co-organizer Lance Brown feels that "the question of replicability [of Via Verde] has been superseded by a sea change within HPD." While the two-stage process has so far proven too time-intensive for HPD to repeat, the agency has revised its own project-team selection criteria, giving 25 percent weight to design. Holly Leicht, a former deputy commissioner for development at HPD, saw design quality in proposals to the agency rise across the board after the NHNY competition. She believes Via Verde's media exposure has raised the bar for housing design in New York and across the country. Leicht also pointed to the successful results of NHNY's relatively open-ended brief, countering the "knee-jerk reaction that in order to get good design you need strict requirements."

Via Verde marks a turning point in New York City housing. With the cost of living continuing to rise and once-plentiful City-owned sites increasingly rare, the need for well-designed housing is growing. Via Verde has achieved one of the most difficult feats in urban housing, producing both a sense of community and access to open space at a high density. The project sets a precedent for what is possible with investment in housing and design.

Karen Kubey | is an architect based in New York specializing in housing design and research. She was the founding co-chair of the New Housing New York Steering Committee and is currently producing an exhibition on low-rise, high-density housing titled *Suburban Alternatives*.

Lance Jay Brown, Mark Ginsberg, and Tara Siegel, architects and co-organizers of the New Housing New York competition, have authored a book documenting the competition process and results: *New Housing New York: Legacy Project. Best Practices in Affordable, Sustainable, Replicable Housing Design*, to be published later this year by Oscar Riera Ojeda.

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