

Architecture

Breaking The Mold

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

THERE are still architects who are bullish on New York. Some people would question whether the firm of Davis, Brody and Associates is bullish or masochistic since it builds housing for New York—a field in which construction conditions are notoriously hostile. (The architects, Lewis Davis and Samuel Brody, with Alan Schwartzman, the third partner, have a wide and varied practice, but housing is an important part of it.) At present, they have almost 8,000 units completed or going up in Manhattan, the Bronx and Brooklyn, under assorted sponsorship for different income levels.

Although New York's housing needs are a bottomless well, this is an impressive number of units. But what is even more impressive is the fact that this is innovative, well-designed housing, breaking the stereotype of both the "luxury" and the subsidized product that has put New York on the bottom line for living amenities. There are enough outstanding things about Davis, Brody housing, representing enough of a total achievement, and enough of it is now visible, quite stunningly, on the New York skyline, to make it worth talking about.

It must also be noted that New York's good housing is most other cities' middling or worse housing, since the constraints of space, density, money and the system conspire to give this city a more minimal product than almost anywhere else. And New York is still a seller's market, with the builder not apt to be overly altruistic, to put it mildly, about providing quality of structure or design. As a rule he gives as little as possible and New Yorkers take it.

In many cases, the Davis, Brody effort represents a good deal of collaborative teamwork on the part of the architect, sponsors and builders—notably the HRH Construction Company and the De Matteis firm—to achieve a superior product. And when it is not as good as the architect would like it to be—one has yet found a way to lick the fact that New York apartments are small and expensive, something even subsidies barely ameliorate—it

is still better in significant ways. The city has its price.

There are now nine visible examples of Davis, Brody housing in New York. The following are of particular interest:

Riverbend Houses, Fifth Avenue between 138th and 142d Streets, begun in 1963 and finished in 1967, a standard-setting middle-income cooperative for 625 families built under Mitchell-Lama provisions by New York City's Housing and Development Administration.

East Midtown Plaza, 23d to 25th Streets between First and Second Avenues, begun in 1963 and built in two stages, with completion in 1972 and later this year, by a non-profit sponsor of community institutions. There are 737 Mitchell-Lama units for low, moderate and middle income families, put up by HDA.

Waterside, the most dramatic and visible Manhattan example, built on piles and platforms in the East River from 25th to 30th Streets, largely through the tenacity of Richard Ravitch of the HRH Construction Company, who succeeded in forging new legislation and financing to make this multi-level, self-sufficient river-edge community possible. Design started in 1963, but construction, begun much later, will be completed this year. Four towers will house 1,471 families, one tower to include low-income rentals, the others to range from middle to luxury levels. They will share a two-acre riverfront plaza and commercial and recreational facilities. Now renting.

Lambert Houses, on Boston Post Road between Bronx Park South and East Tremont Avenue, a low-income, low-rise, high-density (six-story buildings of predominantly duplex apartments) development in a 730-unit, FHA complex. It has been sponsored by the Bronx Park South Community Development Committee and Phipps Houses. (Some young residents wear "Lambert" T-shirts.)

Harlem River Park Houses, 176th to 180th Streets, between the Major Deegan Expressway and the Harlem River in the Bronx, an ex-industrial "island" now the site of the Harlem River State Park. (M. Paul Friedberg and



Robert Gray

Handsome skylines, skillful siting

Associates, landscape architects.) Begun in 1969 by the State Urban Development Corporation, it will house a whopping 1,654 low and moderate income families in two massive, over-40 story towers. Occupancy this spring.

The much smaller Cathedral Parkway Houses, also UDC-built, through its subsidiary, the Harlem Urban Development Corporation. Begun in 1971, 309 Federally subsidized units in a 22-story tower and 12-story slab are in construction just south of St. John the Divine. The associated architect is Roger DeCourey Glasgow.

Ruppert Brewery Renewal Houses, 90th to 92d Streets, Second to Third Avenues, the most massive of all, with 1,850 units in three stepped towers, using Mitchell-Lama and Federal subsidies for middle and upper middle income families and one building of apartments largely for the aged. Housing actually began in 1971, after a decade of community push and pull, and is to be completed this year.

Several things are apparent about this housing. The first is that it is all essentially government-subsidized in one form or another. Some units have been the outcome

of lengthy community controversy and participation, and others are part of urban renewal programs. (Long time lags usually mean community or money problems or urban renewal, or all three.) They do not introduce radical construction breakthroughs, but, rather, promote innovative, money and time-saving uses of conventional systems, such as concrete slabs and the specially developed large brick that is virtually the architects' trademark.

There are ironies, for example, the careful scaling of Midtown East Plaza to respect a community church which was then sold by its congregation and demolished, and the fact that the most faithful staging of relocation and construction cannot keep an old neighborhood from changing radically. Even with amenities and superior design, the larger developments seem to balance on the edge of "projectitis."

The two things that are most immediately noticeable, however, are the shapes of the buildings and the environmental quality of their siting. These unconventional towers are one of the handsomest additions to the skyline in years, but that would be no justification for novel-

ty if they were merely a gimmick, without a functional rationale.

The projecting and recessed forms, angled at the corners and overhung at the top, both reflect and make possible a greater variety of apartment plans and sizes. The diagonal corners open vistas and rooms; the thrusting overhangs mean larger apartments. This greater range of plans, exposures and views may reflect higher costs than for a uniform slab, but the architects point out that such costs are obviously within a permissible limit or the structures would not have been built.

So chalk one up for daylight corridors (Boston Road housing for the elderly and Cathedral Parkway), through exposures (Lambert Houses and East Midtown), maximum views (Harlem River Houses and Waterside), while maintaining open city vistas by not blocking the riverfront (Waterside). The results are not Utopia; nothing in New York is. But anything that can include duplexes in low and middle-income housing (Riverbend, East Midtown Plaza, Lambert) must be doing something right. To say nothing of split-level access walkways and private patios (Riverbend) and low buildings scaled to inner pedestrian plazas (East Midtown Plaza) and recreational space and water promenades (Waterside).

A lot more should be written about this firm's consistently sensitive and skillful use of site design. Their housing works at being part of the community and the immediate surroundings, or provides community itself. The physical design process has been sociologically motivated all the way.

Ruppert takes the curse off high-density, pre-fixed sites by stepping and angling the large buildings down to a triangular shopping plaza, a wedge-shaped public space that will connect with a closed pedestrian street leading to a small park. Cathedral Parkway Houses open to the southeast and the sun. Lambert Houses are linked to allow grassy spaces to "meander" through. The best object lesson is to look at Riverbend and its stock "project" and middle income neighbors.

Davis, Brody say that their work may be "transitional," rather than "monumental" because it links and patches the city's faulty fabric and deals with its changing social needs. The result is a human, esthetic and environmental fusion that has been notably lacking in New York. There should be penalties for architects who do less.