

Architecture

It Can Happen Here

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

IMAGINE, if you can in New York, duplex apartments designed like town houses, each with its own front door reached through a small, walled terrace from an outside gallery that runs the length of the building, or from a "sky street" for duplexes stacked above. Each duplex is floor-through, with windows on both sides. There are spectacular river views or an outlook on a landscaped plaza connecting the buildings like a private park for tenant use. Picture eight of these structures attached to two towers with simplex apartments; each of these has sliding doors to its own terrace and city views.

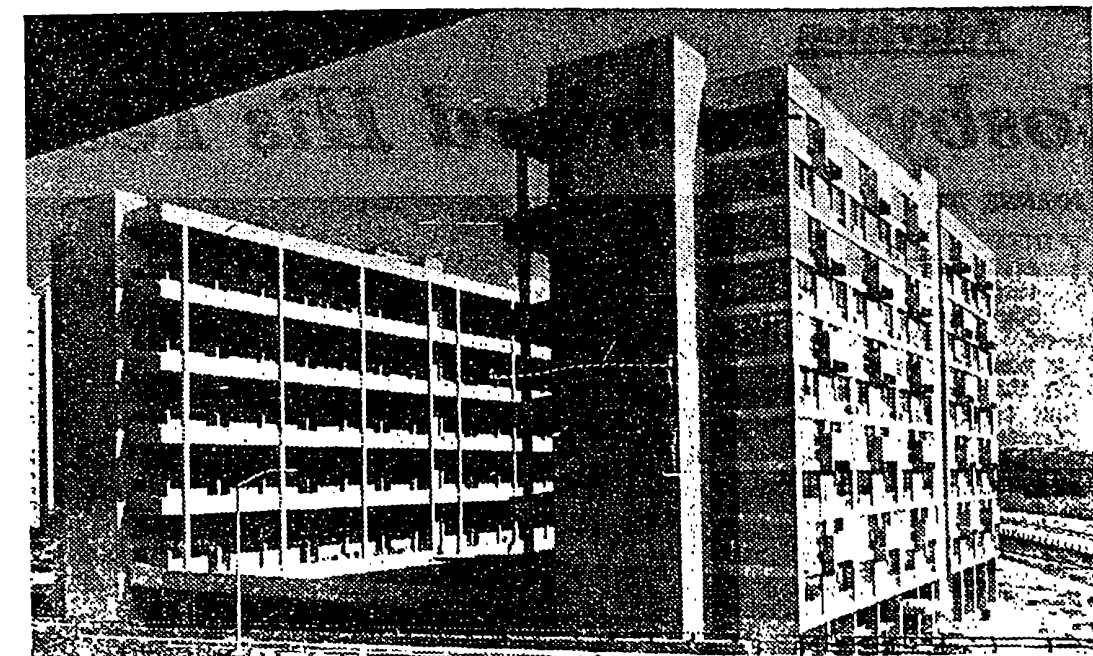
We are not putting you on. That would be cruel in a city where housing is as critical as it is in New York. Nor are we indulging in Utopian housing dreams, an easy thing to do when rentals in "good" neighborhoods are an unabashed \$100 a room and a modest co-op is an unblushing \$50,000.

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This housing exists. But it is not for the Rolls Royce trade. It is in Harlem. This is Riverbend, built under the Mitchell-Lama limited profit housing program and through the city's Housing and Development Administration. It is a \$14-million, 624-family moderate income cooperative on a triangular 3.7-acre site bounded by Fifth Avenue, the Harlem River Drive and 138th Street. Apartment purchase costs are less than \$500 a room, with an average of \$32 a room carrying charge. The duplexes are sold out and the other units are going fast.

Riverbend opened officially to receive its first families this week. What it proves is that well-designed housing at a rational price can be built in New York. But it cannot be done without subsidy. This is a fact of New York real estate known by all but faced by few.

Design, however, is independent of subsidy. The point here is that Riverbend, with or without subsidy, would be handsome, imaginative and desirable, and offers alternative options for living to the stereotyped minimum formulas provided by New York's apartment house builders, who may well give the least for the money in any major American city, even taking into account New York's ex-



David Hirsch
 Riverbend Houses, a new middle-income cooperative in Harlem
"Improvements and economies, as well as distinguished architecture"

traordinary land and construction costs. The exterior design and materials of one of the city's most expensive and visible new cooperatives are so crudely detailed that one wonders if the affluent are blind. Amenities emphasize gilded faucets.

The HRH Construction Corporation, which sponsored and built Riverbend, says that commercial developers can reproduce Riverbend's standards of housing design at competitive private sector prices. But they don't. The same old brick boxes are flung in the public's face whether the money market is tight or loose and regardless of rate or cost of construction. When New York builders build, you know what you are going to get for that ever-increasing slice of that ever-diminishing take-home dollar. It is a sure, standardized profit - formula thing.

What makes the difference at Riverbend? The builder, the architects and the sponsoring city agency. They were a determined triumvirate, slogging through a six-year obstacle course, since everything in American society and municipal bureaucracy seems stacked against doing something different. Richard Ravitch of HRH, Davis, Brody and Associates, the architects, and Samuel Ratensky of HDA, formerly the Housing and Redevelopment Board, all share a knowledge of what good housing design is. It was a matter of principle and standards to them to produce it.

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It can probably be fairly said that a lot of New York builders have absolutely no idea of what good housing design is. What they don't know certainly hasn't hurt them financially. Nor has good housing design ever been understood or encouraged by some of the city's largest non-profit housing sponsors, who keep both rents and standards low. You don't quarrel, in New York, with what you can afford.

The firm of Davis, Brody is one of the more talented in the city. You will not find any speculative apartment houses by this office, and, except for a rarity or two, by any other firm of comparable creative stature. New York apartment houses are not designed; they are punched out to meet the standard formula.

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There is no standard formula at Riverbend. The results are not even recognizable as Mitchell-Lama housing, which carries its rigidly specified trademarks and economies from project to project. From hardware to graphics, from special brick to sprayed wall and ceiling finishes, better answers have been sought. These buildings are a notable demonstration of how creativity and taste can lead to improvements and economies, as well as to distinguished architectural results.

Examples: that handsome, rugged, oversize brick that gives character to the brick and concrete structures was much cheaper to lay than the conventional kind that carries an institutional stamp. With careful site planning and building relationships, the higher floors of the duplex blocks are served by elevators in the two towers through connecting corridors, eliminating the expense of elevators in a large number of the ten buildings.

The particularly attractive lighting fixtures designed by the architects to illuminate the duplex front doors serve two at once and ultimately proved cheaper than available standard fixtures. Those raised community plazas between the buildings in place of bleak, open space conceal required parking underneath at the same time that they turn the space into a social amenity.

The architects lost money at Riverbend, in the time spent on special design, specification and supervision, but it was a calculated risk that has paid off in experience

and other jobs. They are also the architects for city-sponsored houses in construction in the Bellevue South renewal area, and for Waterside, another breakthrough in design and urban land use. City fees are higher now, but city contract problems remain.

Waterside, the city's pioneering attempt at mixed income housing that is yet to be built, has drawn blood from proponents of low income housing as offering too many apartments to those who are not poor and whose lives are not infested with rats. The argument is strong.

Riverbend will probably provoke the same criticism, although its beneficiaries are not white. They are middle income, middle class and black. Most of the people buying the apartments want it just this way. Black or white, this is a group essential to the city's support.

The idea that the city might purchase some units for subsidized low-income housing was outspokenly opposed. Even a liquor store was vetoed as a commercial rental because it might attract trouble. The black middle class making it now is too close to misery to want any part of it.

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The polemics of integration and housing priorities interest these people less than questions of security, from the alarms installed on doors during construction that many will keep, to the inviolability of their new neighborhood. Riverbend is part of a growing black middle-class enclave. Anyone interested in the other side of the coin of Harlem sociology would do well to study it.

The significance of Riverbend, however, is beyond controversy. It is simply that the same thoughtful standards of design can be brought to bear on every kind of housing, from low to high income, in ghettos and out. The dignity of the environment has a lot to do with the dignity of man.