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Intervale Green Apartments: Green, Affordable—and for Low-Income Women

by Regina Cornwell

In a Bronx, New York, neighborhood that once epitomized urban decay, the Women's Housing and Economic Development Corporation has created apartments that conserve energy, cost less to operate than conventional housing, and are beautiful and healthy places to live. It took the vision of a woman who refused to be discouraged.

Green and beautiful low-income housing? This sounds like an oxymoron. The usual standard for housing for the poor has been cheap and functional. But only this year came Intervale Green, a low-income apartment building in the South Bronx that might just be a model for developers.

Intervale Green Apartments is located in Crotona Park East, a once torched and ravaged neighborhood, a casualty of the rage, anger, and drug wars of the late 60s and 70s. In October 1977, the image of a doleful Jimmy Carter was seen worldwide surveying the garbage-strewn land imprinted with lost hopes and lives. He called it our country's "worst slum." Later Ronald Reagan visited the same spot, comparing it to the devastation of the London Blitz. The African American and Latino neighborhood is still dismal today and a risk for many low-income developers.



The woman behind the new Intervale Green is fearless where others are daunted. **Nancy Biberman founded the Women's Housing and Economic Development Corporation (WHEDCo) in 1991.** She is a small woman in her mid-50s, energetic, thoughtful, soft-spoken. An attorney involved with low-income housing and social justice throughout her career, she completed a fellowship at Columbia University's School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation. In the mid-80s, she oversaw the gutting of 23 abandoned buildings in the Bronx and their redesign into 122 affordable apartments.

When later she formed WHEDCo, her mission was clear: affordable housing for the poor as well as such services as counseling, education, and job training—essential, she says, “especially where there is so much poverty. About half the families with children in the Crotona East neighborhood live in poverty.” Realizing that 85 percent of the tenants in the mid-80s project were women, with WHEDCo, she decided to focus on “the needs of women as primary bread winners and caretakers of children,” although not to the exclusion of men. Her staff also reflects this focus: 75 percent are women, including all the teachers and social workers, as are 90 percent of her board.

In the mid-90s, Biberman decided to go after a 70 year-old building, the long-abandoned neo-Renaissance-style Morrisania Hospital. Her first time inside the block-long, flaxen-colored brick building, she “climbed through debris literally up to my chest.” That wasn’t the worst. “There was a dead human there” and “several dead dogs. I was spared looking at them.” A year and a half and \$16.5 million after the nightmare inspection of the 10-story building, work was completed, its majestic façade assuming a commanding new role. Renamed Urban Horizons, it offered 132 low-income apartments in one-half of the building and social and other services in the other.

By 2004 Nancy Biberman believed it was the right time to take on another daring venture. This time it would be a new green low-income apartment building with beautiful amenities.

Welcome to Intervale Green Apartments. Quietly but clearly it engages in a dialogue with the old psychology and social policies that say the poor don't need beauty—just basics. But Biberman understands that beautiful places change people's attitudes, reduce stress, improve productivity, and also give people hope.

The \$39 million building at 1330 Intervale Avenue is six and seven stories built in the style of traditional Bronx architecture. Red brickwork dominates with yellow brick detail. A white decorative cornice surrounds the building at the roof’s edge, another touch of the old Bronx. The sidewalks are pleasantly wide with street trees surrounding the entire building. Intervale Green’s pocket sculpture park stands near the tip of the building’s triangular-shaped lot. A low decorative iron fence surrounds the park. Local artists will regularly show there. The 150,000 square foot building also has two green roofs and a pair of landscaped courtyards.

Three to four small retail spaces stand in the building at street level. They’ll serve as a catalyst along with the apartments to rejuvenate the bleak neighborhood, though in a stagnant economy the process may take a lot longer than WHEDCo had planned.

Moving In

Tashika, a bank teller in her late 20s, moved into Intervale Green from a domestic violence shelter where she’d lived with her three small children for two years. “I was just about paid off with my debts,” she said, “when they asked me if I wanted an apartment.” Section Eight vouchers help her pay the rent, as it will help others coming to Intervale.

“What,” I asked, “did this move mean to you?” “Three things,” she responded without hesitation. “A new beginning, a safe environment, and, a second chance.” Her lovely face tightened with determination as she repeated the last words, “a second chance.”

Tenants began moving into Intervale Green in late February. At the time of writing they are still moving in, and 87 percent of the heads of households are women. The units rent for \$782 a month for one bedroom, \$943 for two, and \$1089 for three bedrooms, based on family size and income range. The residents are all poor and one third of the units are reserved for families coming from homeless shelters. WHEDCo has an [Internet campaign](#) underway appealing for money to furnish apartments.

Thirteen-thirty Intervale celebrates light from its airy entrance through its large foyer to the interior. Wide hallways are brightly illuminated through windows at corners and near elevators. Off-white Italian tile flooring, donated by the upscale company, Artistic Tile, increases the luminosity and lends a feeling of buoyancy to the hallway space. Fresh air, thanks to the “green” ventilation system, contrasts dramatically with the outdoor air in the South Bronx where toxic industries and waste disposal continue to take their toll with one of the highest asthma rates in the country (although environmental activists are having successes in and out of court). Inside the apartments, birch-colored floors warm a space that seemed enlarged by the winter light streaming in. The sconces and pendant light fixtures in the apartments and hallways are reminiscent of Art Deco, inspired by the extraordinary buildings on the borough’s Grand Concourse.

“Green construction is only 2 percent to 3 percent more than conventional construction,” said Victoria Shire, deputy director of Enterprise New York, a not-for-profit specializing in affordable housing. These costs could easily be cancelled out, she said, by subsidies available from city, state and federal governments. While the budget didn’t allow for items such as solar panels, WHEDCo still succeeds in reducing its carbon footprint with properly sized boilers, efficient insulation, double-pane windows treated with a metal transparent coating to reflect solar heat outside in summer and radiant heat inside in winter, Energy Star appliances, compact fluorescents, and occupancy sensors to turn lights on and off as a person enters and leaves an empty room. The result: a 30 percent decrease in energy use over that of a conventional building, reducing both resident utility bills and WHEDCo operating costs. With its 128 units, it is the largest affordable apartment complex in the country to receive a federal Energy Star certification. In this economy, said Biberman, residents “can spend the money saved on utilities on food and other essentials.”

The beautiful flooring in the apartments is another green item. While it looks like a light-colored wood such as birch, it is made of vinyl, more durable than wood. Other amenities, not necessarily beautiful or green, are very useful. Laundry rooms on every floor are unusual even in expensive Manhattan buildings, but Intervale Green has them. Even more important for tenants with little means, each unit is equipped with a free computer. And low cost high speed Internet service is available.

With buildings accounting for nearly 80 percent of the carbon dioxide emissions in New York City, greening and beautiful design are an unbeatable combination. And with Intervale Green, they are no longer an oxymoron with housing for the poor.