

Rutgers Team Tries to Merge Green Building and Active, Healthy Living in South Bronx

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By Steve Manas

NEW BRUNSWICK, N.J. – While not boasting the familiarity of, say, 42nd Street and Times Square, or Hollywood and Vine, Rutgers Professor Clint Andrews hopes that one day, the intersection of “Green Building and Active, Healthy Living” will be just as recognizable to many Americans, starting with residents of one targeted building in the South Bronx.

Andrews, a professor at the Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy, recently received two grants and a gift totaling about \$720,000 to conduct environment-friendly, energy-related research at the Rutgers Center for Green Building (CGB), which he directs. Most – \$650,000 – came from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development to support a 24-month project, Expanding the Definition of Green: Impacts of Green and Active Living Design on Health in Low Income Housing. He is directing a team to study how introducing simple behavioral changes, supported by very modest building design modifications, can improve the health of residents of Intervale Green, a year-old, green apartment building for low-income Bronxites. The South Bronx is known for its high concentration of asthma sufferers.



Credit: Courtesy of
WHEDCo
*Intervale Green Sculpture
Garden*

“Living in a green building can lead to healthier lives for residents. We hope to implement interventions – some technical fixes, some behavioral,” Andrews said. “For example, we might suggest installing better lighting or painting murals in stairwells to encourage walking over riding elevators. To improve indoor air quality, we can remind residents to vacuum regularly, change the filters in their air conditioners or use more effective cleaning supplies.”



Kids playing on Intervale's grounds.

Built and managed by The Women's Housing and Economic Development Corp. (WHEDCo), a green-conscious nonprofit dedicated to alleviating poverty, Intervale Green has 10 stories with 127 apartments, ground-floor commercial space, more than a half-acre of vegetation and two landscaped courtyards for tenant use. About half the residents are black, the other half Hispanic. Most are young, many with children. There is a mix of couples and single moms, and one-third of the renters previously were homeless.

Andrews learned of Intervale Green through Professor Richard Wener, an environmental psychologist at NYU-Polytechnic Institute, who worked on the New York City Department of Health's successful "Take the Stairs" campaign, and later spent a sabbatical leave at Bloustein. He had previously worked with residents in a second WHEDCo building. Wener is a co-principal investigator on Andrews' study, together with Associate Professor Gediminis Mainelis, an expert on indoor air quality, from Rutgers' Department of Environmental Sciences at the School of Environmental and Biological Sciences.

"We're engaged in participatory research with residents to learn what issues to focus on and how to keep them involved," explained Jennifer Senick, CGB executive director. "Family is a common thread, and residents are happy we are listening to their health concerns." She said that residents had huge concerns about asthma, wheezing and other respiratory problems, whose origins and recurring episodes might be attributed to indoor or outdoor air quality, cigarette smoke or allergies.

Surprisingly, few raised issues about physical activity or diet. Andrews said the grounds include a hopscotch court and that playground-rich Crotona Park was perceived to be within a safe and manageable walking distance. While there are supermarkets in the South Bronx, the nearest food comes from bodegas and ethnic restaurants. "The residents have options, but additional choices would be helpful, Andrews observed.

"This spring, we hope to have urban planning graduate students in a studio class do community asset mapping, including food options, Andrews said. "The building has a green roof. Maybe there's sufficient space for a small vegetable or herb garden. We'd also like them to dream up other active living ideas, such as a 'walking school bus' to a neighborhood school."

Since the building is so new, residents are still getting to know and trust each other, Andrews said. To facilitate the process, the team organized a "Healthy Halloween" event in the community room, which was turned into a haunted house. Volunteers made healthy snacks, painted the youngsters' faces and handed out free jump ropes. Team members gave the adults Metro Cards (there

is a subway station close by) during brief, preliminary interviews to learn about their worries. They have been following up with some 40 residents and hope a large percentage will agree to further interviews and the suggested interventions through the life of the study. Additional healthy buildingwide events are planned for Thanksgiving and Christmas.

The team will judge the study's success on whether specific interventions make a difference in the health of residents. Andrews' said the project may purchase a vacuum for each floor to see if regular use can help improve indoor air quality and alleviate symptoms of asthma or other respiratory problems..

"We also would like to help create social networks, like a tenants' association, to build a sense of community," Andrews said. "If we can identify best practices and strategies that can be shared elsewhere, that will make the study successful."