

SHELTERFORCE

THE VOICE OF COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

The Guided Tours at Urban Horizons

Gabrielle Bendiner-Viani March 1, 2004

The Guided Tours at Urban Horizons is part of my ongoing series of collaborative projects involving people in their personal spaces. This project with the residents of Urban Horizons reveals the relationship between the building's thoughtful spaces and the building of their own lives. With the help of superintendent Tony Sosa, I asked five residents – Narcissa, Isaura, Norma, Tony and Frances – to guide me through the spaces in their apartments where they felt most comfortable and most at home. I hope those who view these photographs and read the excerpts from the residents' discussions of home can feel the importance thoughtfully planned housing plays in their lives. These are rare places where they can allow their individual identities to grow and flourish. What my tour guides share with us is both valuable and essential, and I thank them.



Norma's Living Room

I came here from a shelter. All my life, I lived in Manhattan. I didn't want to come to this part of the Bronx, for real, I didn't. I feel safe, though, I really do feel safe. We have security, we have a doorman. The apartment is beautiful, it's cozy, it's quiet, I love it.

The most special room is my living room. I just sit there, I can sit at the table and I make my phone calls, I open my windows, I see outside. When I moved in, I started working on my living room... So, I went to Ikea, you know, which is a great department store...Wow, they have so much nice stuff and they make things that help you organize your things just so neatly. It's so homey and... it's just beautiful. So, I got some of my ideas there when I found out about the store. I didn't know that they had such stores. I would go to these stores around here, Third Ave., and their furniture is expensive and it's no good. It started there, little by little. That store just gave me little ideas.

I love my living room. I love just the way it is, the way I've made it, that my family, we eat here and we have dinner here. We watch TV, we watch [the] History channel together...it's cozy. It's just homey. That's why I did the living room first, that's where I put all my energy. I mean, I have help from my children, but you know...

I didn't have those couches, they're brand new. I didn't have my mirror; I didn't have any of that. I just had the wall unit and the table; those are the only things I had. I had other couches, which I got rid of. And then, this Christmas, I finally bought the clock, the mirror, the little decorations that are on the wall, the sofas, and other little things, to decorate. — *Norma*



Norma's Kitchen

This is just me. I love this, I love cleanliness. I didn't have this! Little by little, I've gotten this. I didn't have all this when I got here.

I made all this happen for me. This is my space, this is my home. This is where my children... I'm nourishing my children. So it's important to me, my environment here.

This is my kitchen. I love cooking. I do everything here. It's perfect for me. It's small, but I put in so much love toward what I do when I cook.

The house reflects the person I am. It reflects so much of what I do. I always keep everything clean, always, always, always. — *Norma*



Norma's Dining Room.

My daughter's amazing. The drawings that she makes are incredible. And now my son wants to be an architect. The school that he goes to is very good, and they gave me a flyer for free classes at 91st Street and Columbus Avenue and he gets three hours, Saturdays, of free classes of art, cause he wants to be an architect. He's in sixth grade, so by the time he graduates and goes to high school, he's going to have his portfolio.

I had my daughter when I was so young, I know. Although, I never missed teachers' conferences with her, and I was always so attentive with her, always motivated her and always praised her to do whatever she wanted... She graduated high school at the age of seventeen and she went right away to FIT [Fashion Institute of Technology].

With my son, I'm doing things a little differently, because I knew my daughter had a talent, but Cindy wasn't ready, she didn't have a portfolio. I wasn't educated about what to do...and I was so young. I didn't know, because I'm learning. It's a process, learning. It's a process and it's as you go, and it's different stages, so now, with Marcos...I go to Barnes and Nobles with him, I buy him an architecture book. It was expensive, but, he wants to do that, he wants to look at different ideas, so I'm trying to help him.

To help them, it's a process, and also to motivate them, it's important, and that's why I always try to always keep my home like this, because I think it also helps the child want to do other things, bigger things and better things, and feel comfortable and feel free.

I feel calm here, I feel at ease, I could think better, analyze. You know... —
Norma



Tony's Kitchen

The kitchen, take a look at the kitchen. Look at this. If you have company, you take these glasses and stuff out of the way, and you could pass the food, through there, so you don't have to be walking back and forth. I mean, it's nice. I love to cook...everything. Rice and beans, steaks, you know what I mean; I like cooking.

See, these are Christian's snacks. He loves his snacks. He comes home from school – cheese and crackers...I make him comfortable. He doesn't even like to go in the street, because he has everything here. I bought him a bicycle. He has friends, but he's an inside person. He has everything! He's got his computer, everything. He feels comfortable, you know what I mean? And he's a good kid. Not because he's my son, but because he's a nice kid.

You see the cabinets. You got cabinets! And I have them full, too! You know, in case of a snowstorm or you know, whatever. You got to keep food in the house. If we didn't have all these cabinets, where are you going to put your food? I mean, where? Or your pans and pots? You keep everything in order, see? How comfortable can you get? I mean, I've been in this country all my life, you could say, since I came here when I was twelve...

How comfortable can anybody get? I walk in here, and I'm home. — *Tony*

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