

May 11, 2009

# The New York Times

## BIG CITY

### A Green Building, for Those Without Much of the Green Stuff to Spare

By **SUSAN DOMINUS**

The green movement has something of an image problem in that the sheen of luxury clings to so much of it, with Whole Foods, hybrid cars and organic silk sweaters pricing themselves out of the lives of most consumers. If you want to find a market that really hates energy inefficiency, try people who are short on money — like low-income New Yorkers — people who spend an absurdly high percentage of what money they do have on utilities, a crowd that has the least money to waste on waste.



Michael Appleton for The New York Times

At Intervale Green in the Bronx, a green roof was chosen not only for its eco-friendly qualities but as a visual reminder of the building's mission.

That's why Christine Prince, 35, an unemployed single mother of three, doesn't mind that the lighting in her two-bedroom apartment in the Bronx is on the dim side. "I don't need that really bright light," she said last week in her home in East

Crotona, her 16-month-old son toddling nearby. She walked to her bathroom and flushed the toilet. “See how the water doesn’t come all the way to the top?” she said with pride, pointing out a low-flow feature of the plumbing. “It doesn’t spray up all over the place.”

Since March 10, Ms. Prince has been living in an apartment in the Intervale Green complex, on Intervale Avenue between Freeman Street and Louis Niño Boulevard, an infamous strip of South Bronx urban blight (it served as backdrop for some of the most gruesome scenes in the movie “Fort Apache, the Bronx”). Ms. Prince talks about the new, green, low-income housing development to anyone who will listen, so much so that she is afraid people are going to tell her “to shut up about it.” The building, developed by the [Women’s Housing and Economic Development Corporation](#), or Whedco, a Bronx nonprofit group, opened to qualified low-income residents in February, and has filled about a third of its 128 apartments. And, yes, Ms. Prince does have bragging rights. Designed with a large, glass-windowed lobby, two green roofs and a sculpture-filled courtyard, the development, tasteful, sparkling and eco-friendly, could give many cookie-cutter luxury buildings a run for their money.

Two green roofs? A sculpture garden? What, no indoor pool? Given the current citywide crunch in affordable housing, given our assumptions about green goods as status symbols, it’s worth wondering how the social and environmental benefits of a green building are weighed against the additional costs. Very carefully, says Nancy Biberman, Whedco’s founder and president.

“This is a subject of intense debate,” she acknowledged. But it’s her hope, and belief, based on the oversight of the New York State Energy Research and Development Authority, that the investments in the building’s costly, highly insulated windows will easily recuperate their value by reducing the cost of heating. And the costs for residents may end up lower as well. With Energy-Star appliances, lighting fixtures designed for [compact fluorescent lighting](#) and other amenities, Ms. Biberman says she expects residents’ utility bills to be 30 percent less than they would otherwise be.

Even the most skeptical could at least consider Intervale Green a worthwhile experiment — the state authority provided some financing for the \$38 million

project and is making the building part of a program to evaluate the cost-effectiveness of green affordable housing.

Ms. Prince, who previously lived near Jerome Avenue in a mice- and roach-infested apartment paid for by the Department of Homeless Services, says that in her new home she can finally breathe easily. And she's not speaking figuratively. "This time of year, I've usually been to the doctor three times for allergies," she says. "But now" — she inhales deeply through her nose — "I can breathe in like that." A graying woman loading laundry down the hall immediately commented on how much better she felt since moving in; she said she usually suffered from asthma, but hasn't had so much as a twinge since she moved in a few months ago.

Ms. Biberman is the first to admit that green roofs, as far as she knows, have not yet been proved to reduce energy costs (they cool buildings and reduce storm water runoff), but she says that the roofs, like the generous landscape design, were something her organization deemed worthwhile. "Green has to be something you see, not just what's behind the walls," she said.

The South Bronx was once known exclusively for its burned-down buildings, drug wars and piles of rubble. When historians look back at the current era in the borough, they'll still see intractable crime and poverty, but they'll also see, out of the nonprofit group [Sustainable South Bronx](#), an early program to train unskilled workers in green careers, which may prove to be a model nationwide for stimulus-funded green job-training programs. They'll also see Intervale Green, which Ms. Biberman says is currently the largest affordable green housing development in the country.

Both the Bronx and the green movement have image problems; the involvement of one with the other may prove crucial in permanently turning both around.