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Diggs Town

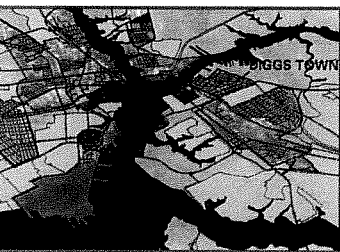
PLACE DESIGN AWARD

Designer: Urban Design Associates, Pittsburgh; CMSS Architects, Norfolk

Sponsor: Norfolk Redevelopment and Housing Authority

Funding: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Comprehensive Improvement Assistance Program

A public housing project is remade by inserting streets into the site plan and using architectural and landscape strategies that help residents take ownership of open space.



Above: Location of Diggs Town in Norfolk

Right: Site plan before and after the renovations

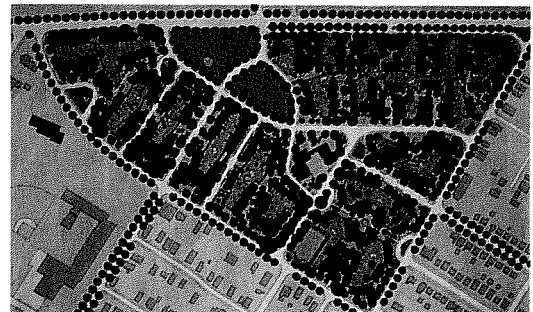
Graphics: Urban Design Associates

Diggs Town Public Housing involved the redesign and redevelopment of a public housing project built in the 1950s. Though it preceded the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's HOPE VI program, it has provided a model for the many public housing reconfiguration and redesign projects that have been launched in recent years.

Diggs Town was built in an institutional style: 428 units in low-rise barrack-type structures that were deployed over large superblocks. The structures lacked any expression of individuality; outdoor spaces were difficult for residents to use and for the housing authority to maintain. Like many projects of this sort, Diggs Town had become plagued with serious problems of unemployment, crime, drugs and decay. Residents feared for their lives and their children's safety. They felt they had lost control of their community.

In 1990, the Norfolk Redevelopment and Housing Authority (NRHA) initiated a \$17-million redevelopment of Diggs Town, using HUD funds, along with a series of educational and crime prevention programs. The NRHA commissioned this urban design plan as a demonstration project to coordinate physical design changes with social programs enabling public housing residents to create a safe, stable neighborhood and to increase their economic mobility.

The design, produced in working sessions with residents, designers and staff from the NRHA and city, focused on elements that would establish the structure of a traditional neighborhood and enable residents to create a community. These included defining the front and back yards of individual units with through addition of front porches, back patios, front and back fences and storage units. Buildings are grouped around communal backyards that are secured by fencing and the configuration of the buildings. Ultimately,

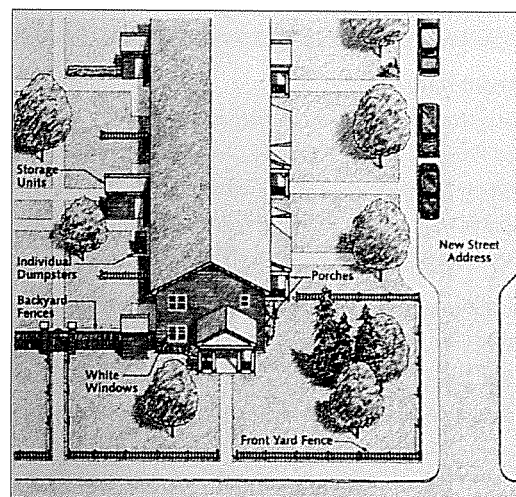
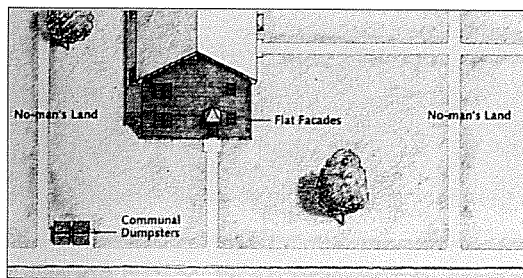




Above: Residents say the design changes have improved the opportunities for socializing.

Below and right: Before and after sketches show how the open space was transformed into yards that are maintained and can be observed from the housing units.

Photo and graphics: Urban Design Associates



community gardens and play areas will be incorporated into these areas. Other improvements included lighting, landscaping and utility upgrades.

The new pattern of streets and open spaces links Diggs Town to its surroundings. By changing the image of the buildings to resemble the house in a typical neighborhood, psychological boundaries are disappearing, and nearby parks, schools, churches and institutions are now part of residents' daily lives.

In addition, the Diggs Town Economic Empowerment Demonstration project involves 199 participants in 174 households. It includes family self-sufficiency planning, employment and education counseling, and family and personal counseling. Participants work intensively with case managers to set goals and ensure they receive necessary services.

Since the completion of the project in 1994, residents have begun to plant and embellish their yards and porches in numerous ways. Diggs Town also features resident-initiated mixed uses: one resident opened a snack shop in her apartment and a day-care center is flourishing.

There have been measurable decreases in the local crime rate, increases in homeownership preparedness, and more participation in education and job programs. Residents and community police officers report a dramatic drop in crime and an increase in self-esteem and community pride. After three years of occupancy, social programs document substantial increases in the income of residents, employment and participation in education and job training programs. The project is now being studied by a team of sociologists who will document the impact of the physical changes on social conditions.



Above, opposite page:
Typical houses and yards in the renovated development.

Right: **Residential and community areas before the renovation.** Since the design of the open space was not related to any of the homes, the space between the buildings was a "no-man's land."

Photos: **Urban Design Associates**

Preliminary Evaluations

Excerpted from Stephanie E. Bothwell, Raymond Gindroz and Robert E. Lang, "Restoring Community through Traditional Neighborhood Design," Housing Policy Debate 9:1 (1998), 103–108. This copyrighted material is used with the permission of the Fannie Mae Foundation.

Six months after Diggs Town's redesign was complete we began our evaluative process. Although a much more rigorous evaluation is underway to confirm the value of concepts that drove the redesign, we nonetheless found good preliminary evidence of a positive community impact. A flavor of this change is evident in our field notes:

...there is a community police officer whose post is in one of the units. It is on a street that still had problems after the changes. Drug dealers lived in the middle of the new street. Our putting in the new street, unfortunately, gave them the opportunity to conduct a brisk drive-through business.¹

Once the officer's post was in place, the customers disappeared and the drug dealers moved off the block. Most important, the officer is a part of the neighborhood and knows everyone and their families. The result is that police calls have gone down from twenty-five to thirty a day or two to three per week. ...

Evidence ... demonstrates the importance of a decent-looking home in improving a resident's self esteem and sense of connection to the community. We interviewed a group of Diggs Town church-goers who, prior to the redesign, felt anxious arriving at services from an unsightly public housing project. Once Diggs Town had been redesigned to resemble a typical Norfolk sub-



division, the same church-goers were comfortable in engaging the community outside the project. In addition, attendees of the same church who lived outside Diggs Town reported feeling more comfortable with the Diggs Town church-goers after the redesign. ...

The NRHA is conducting an ongoing evaluation of the Diggs Town project. ... The first-year evaluation ... suggests that, though there remains much difficult work ahead for residents to reach the goals they have set for themselves, significant changes have occurred in the social, economic and physical quality of life of the community. Those who participated in the [Diggs Town Economic Empowerment Demonstration, a self-sufficiency program,] showed the greatest gains in all categories. Those residents received the highest incomes, moved off welfare rolls more often and saved more.

Thirty-nine participants enrolled in an education program during the first two years, and 86 enrolled in skills training of some kind. Thirty-three participants had sufficient income to move off welfare in the first



two years of enrollment. ... Despite improvements over the last two years, Diggs Town still contains a heavy concentration of low-income families with inadequate opportunities for social mobility. ...

The problem for us in assessing the impact of physical design alone is that Diggs Town's revitalization came packaged with a host of social interventions. Certainly we understand and support a comprehensive revitalization effort; however ... it would have been easier for us to gauge the importance of physical redesign in the absence of other program initiatives. ...

[This case study] is only a first step in a broader evaluation of housing projects redesigned using TND [Traditional Neighborhood Design] principles. Subsequent studies should employ a more formal social scientific evaluation. ... For example, there has yet to be a deep ethnographic study of a TND community of the type Herbert Gans undertook in his classic work on Levittown. An ethnography would yield a wealth of information about whether individual components of the built environment (e.g., front yards) facilitate greater interaction, leading to a better sense of community.

Jury Comments

GANTT: This came out of HUD's modernization projects. In a prototypical way, it started dealing with issues of territoriality and defensible space.

FRANCIS: This takes a very simple idea—pushing out and doing things with porches and gardens—and applies it to public housing. These photographs are staged, but it looks like a very successful environment.

GANTT: With relatively simple additions to the facade, they started to create space and place. The public investment and social side is that there is a huge amount of public housing that we are trying to restore. We are trying to understand the principles that help people go from living in the project to having an address on the street, a process that is embodied in this work.

VERNEZ-MOUDON: The first project of this sort was done in Cambridge, fifteen years ago. This project is not innovative in that sense, but it's pretty substantial.

ZEISEL: Twenty years ago when we were started to think about this problem, and projects like this weren't being done, we would have jumped on a project like this and said, "Look how great this is." Now that there has been a lot of good work, we can say, "This is the way to do it." But that doesn't mean we shouldn't give this an award.

VERNEZ-MOUDON: I gave this my highest score; I think these projects need more help. The Cambridge project included shopping; this one doesn't.

GANTT: I think it's well designed, simple, follows research principles in a very nice way. It has applicability to other projects and, in fact, has been applied in a lot of ways. It makes sense for us to give it an award for the creation of space in a desolate environment.

HALSBAND: Just following the rules doesn't produce a winner. We've seen many things that have followed these same rules and failed. This seems to be a wonderful place.

Note

1. The open-street design inherent in TND may facilitate some crimes that rely on easy access to neighborhoods. However, we believe that this potential problem is offset by the improved community social controls that come from people better knowing one another.