

POLICY AND DESIGN FOR HOUSING

Lessons of the Urban Development Corporation 1968-1975

Part 1 Introduction and 6 case studies

The UDC's 33,000 units of housing ranged from high-rise to low-rise, in sites ranging from rural communities to the middle of New York City. The questions the UDC sought to answer were numerous. We explore these through case studies of six rural and urban UDC developments, highlighting the intents and challenges of these projects through original plans and photographs.

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Commitment | Vision | Action

The decade of the 60's was marked by social and political turmoil that had a dramatic effect on our country. The visible impacts were felt in cities, towns and villages throughout the country, including New York State. The decade began with the hope that we could eliminate poverty and address racial, social and human rights injustices that had plagued our country from its inception.

Reality set in as the President of the United States, John F. Kennedy, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr. and New York Senator Robert F. Kennedy were assassinated in a span of less than five years. What began as a decade dedicated to a war against poverty and the empowerment of the poor ended in the Vietnam War that diverted attention and resources from the rebuilding of our cities.

In the late 60's, there was a severe shortage of housing in the State with a gap between housing production and demand of at least 500,000 units. While the housing crisis was most severely felt by low- and moderate-income families, middle-income people were not immune from its effects.

The central cities were adversely influenced by the pattern of development in the suburbs. Because of discriminatory housing financing and development practices – based on race, income and gender – a “white noose” of suburban development surrounded a central core of disinvested older Black and Latino neighborhoods.

Not only were New York City's inner city communities experiencing urban decay, but many upstate communities also had high rates of deterioration due to disinvestment.

In 1968, Governor Nelson A. Rockefeller asked Edward J. Logue, who had just completed major public projects in Boston, New Haven and New York City, to assist the State of New York to “design and build” affordable housing statewide. To accomplish this, innovative State legislation was written and eventually passed in the wake of the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., to create a new entity, the Urban Development Corporation (UDC), which was dedicated to the principles of the slain civil rights leader.

The UDC was given broad authority and financial resources to fulfill its mission to “improve the physical environment for low- and moderate-income families and to improve their job opportunities.”

Under the direction of its skilled, energetic and committed Chief Executive Officer, Edward J. Logue, the UDC applied those powers to develop projects representing the highest ambitions of twentieth century public development: non-disruptive urban renewal; fair share suburban housing for the poor; model housing for the elderly; low-rise high-density urban housing prototypes; and magnetic New-Towns-in-Town integrating rich and poor, prototype schools and innovative infrastructure.

The UDC built 33,000 units of housing and three new communities, which are still providing affordable housing today.

The UDC made a commitment to learn about the everyday life and social bonds among eventual residents. Criteria were developed to guide architects toward improving overall livability in the housing built by the public sector.

The UDC still exists, yet in name alone, now doing business as the Empire State Development Corporation. Because the UDC attempted to do what many in government were too timid to implement – mixed-income integrated residential communities throughout the State – its powers were curtailed and its mission to house all New Yorkers stripped from its functions. In the period from 1968 to 1975 the UDC accomplished much to be proud of and contributed significantly to our domestic policy agenda.

How did this American “experiment in social housing” affect its end users – people? How did the creation of qualitative housing criteria inform the issue of housing design? What did the UDC's experience teach about the social, economic and political consequences of its efforts?

We now examine these and other issues in order to stimulate a new dialogue – and seek a plan of action – to address our present pressing housing and community development needs and develop new programs for housing people irrespective of their income. We can look to the past to remember that we have choices. Specifically, the achievements of the UDC offer a chance to contemplate the benefits of a different social model to build high-quality mixed-income communities.

Once again there is a severe housing shortage in New York State of 200,000 to 400,000 units and growing homelessness with few replacement programs on the horizon. In New York City alone, 36,000 people face the threat of losing their homes due to expiring subsidies. Thus, the development and design communities have an opportunity to assist in building a new commitment to high quality social housing to match the growing public demand for affordable housing throughout the State.

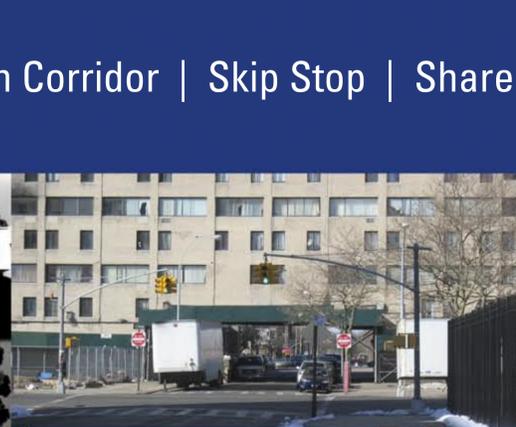
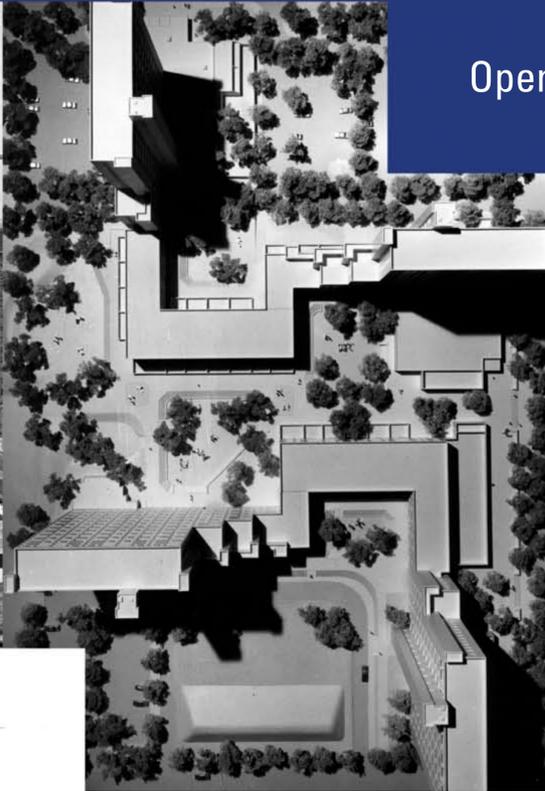
Despite the differences in today's political climate as compared to that of the late 1960's and 1970's, much can be learned and adapted to the present social and political environment. The issues we face now are larger than any faced by the UDC: the globe itself is at stake. What in these times is “the public interest?” How should we be expressing and enforcing the part of the public interest that has to do with housing and urban development? How should we be acting for the less fortunate if we want to continue to claim to be a just society?

As Ed Logue demanded at the founding of the Urban Development Corporation, so we declare:

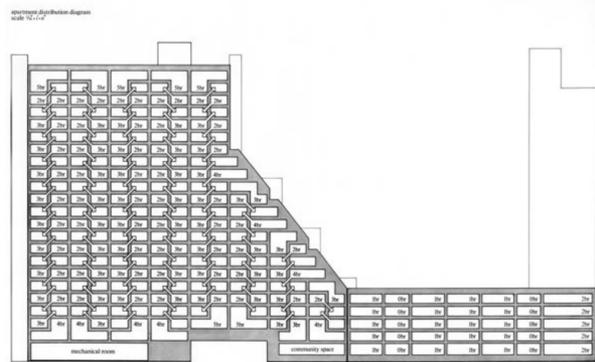
Let there be commitment!

Sea Park East

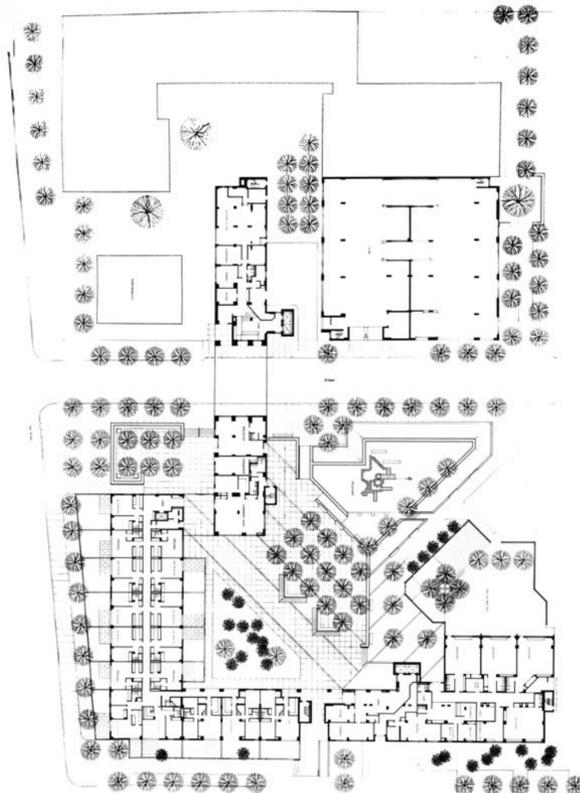
Open Corridor | Skip Stop | Shared Space



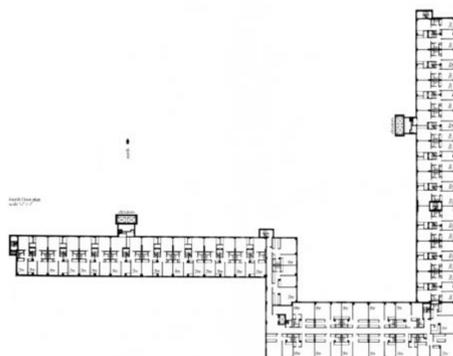
1972



Apartment Distribution diagram



Site plan



4th floor plan

2004

Coney Island, NY 1972

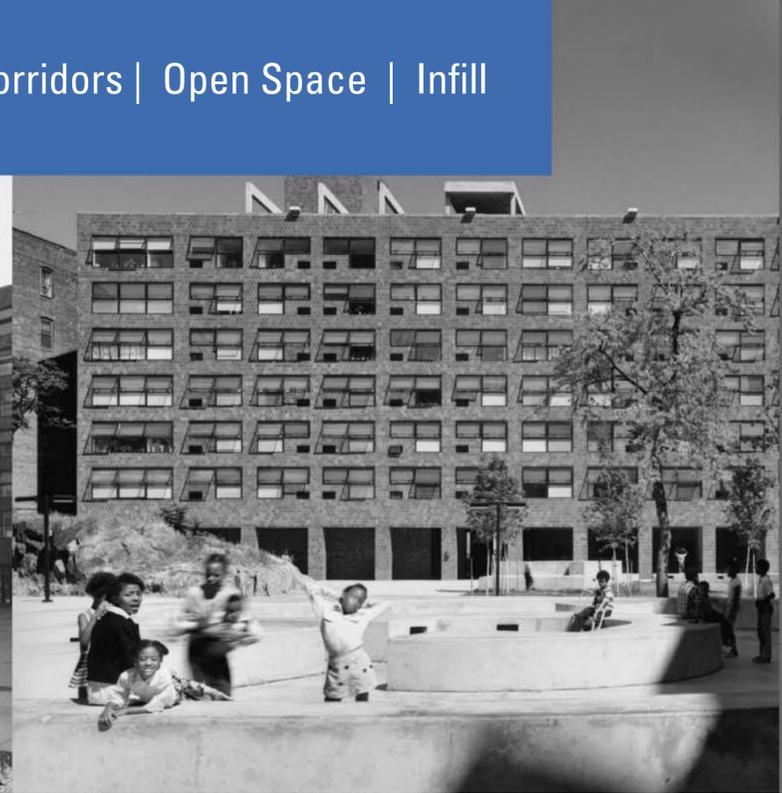
The UDC acquired a number of sites within the Coney Island Urban Renewal Area and hired several architects to design new housing; Sea Park East was one of the first to be built. The scheme respects the surrounding urban fabric, with gradual setbacks on the high-rise sections relating the buildings to the scale of the existing street. The buildings have spectacular views over the water, while their form and relationship create defined open public spaces for residents. The complex is organized internally around a system of open gallery access corridors that overlook the public spaces. The larger apartments, some with five bedrooms, are duplexes that create more home-like settings for the families living there. Gallery access allows every apartment to have a double exposure and cross-ventilation, while the duplexes permit the economy of elevator stops at every other floor.

The scheme provides for 332 units on 3 acres, yielding a density of 466 persons or 110 dwellings per acre. Construction began in September 1970 and the buildings were occupied in October 1972. The buildings are now undergoing substantial renovation by developers who purchased the complex from the UDC (now doing business as the Empire Development Corporation) which had acquired the property in the 1980s through foreclosure. A condition of the sale was that rents be kept at current levels, so the developers assembled an extensive array of financing programs/grants that will continue to provide housing for people with modest incomes for the next 40 years.

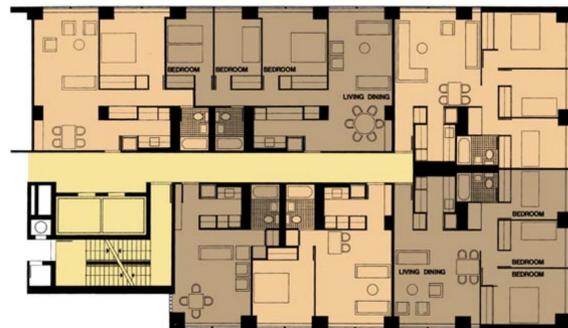
Architect: Hoberman & Wasserman // Structural Engineer: Robert Rosenwasser // Mechanical Engineers: Barrett Associates
 Landscape Architect: Nicholas Quennell // Developer: Sea Park East Co.
 Photography © Bill Rothschild, new photographs © CCNY Research Team, Janelie Moyse and Jessica Hart

Twin Parks North East

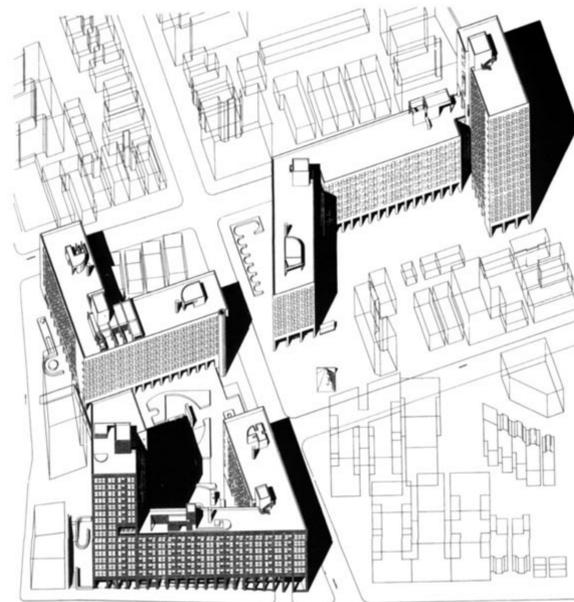
Single-loaded Corridors | Open Space | Infill



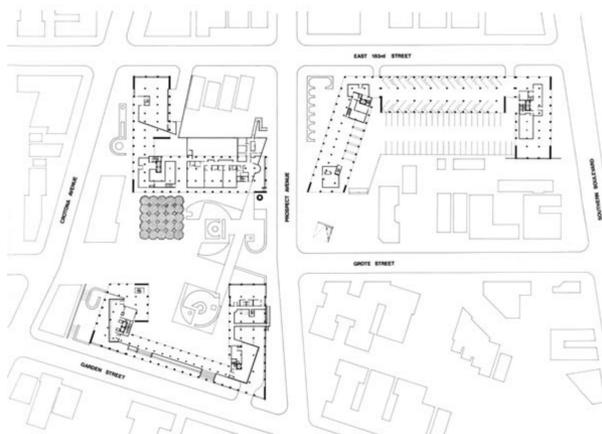
1972



Typical unit



Site axonometric



Site plan

Bronx, NY 1972

The three buildings of the Twin Parks North East development range from seven to 16 stories and contain 523 housing units. The site, three adjoining blocks, exists on an irregular street grid. Further complicating the geometry are a number of existing residential buildings on two of the three blocks. Twin Parks N.E. is an "infill site" in which Meier's buildings weave together the existing and new building fabric, creating shared open spaces mid-block and maintaining the street wall where required.

Twin Parks N.E.'s buildings are on "pilots" with occasional building lobbies connecting the ground to the floors above. These ground level lobbies are glass boxes set obliquely into the column grid. The undercroft space gives access from the street to the interior communal spaces and the deft weaving of building forms (old and new) throughout the site, creates a variety of views and enclosures. The two 16-story towers anchor each extremity of the site; connecting them is the continuous parapet line of the seven-story structures. The new elements were designed to harmonize in scale and color with the neighborhood. Large horizontal fenestration, awning windows, and refined elevations create a building aesthetic that does not "read" as publicly assisted housing.

Architects: Richard Meier & Associates // Structural Engineer: Robert Rosenwasser
 Landscape Architect: Joseph Gangemi // General Contractor: Leon D. DeMatteis & Sons, Inc.
 Photography: Ezra Stoller © Esto

Elderly Housing Prototype

Elderly | Courtyards | Private Outdoor Space



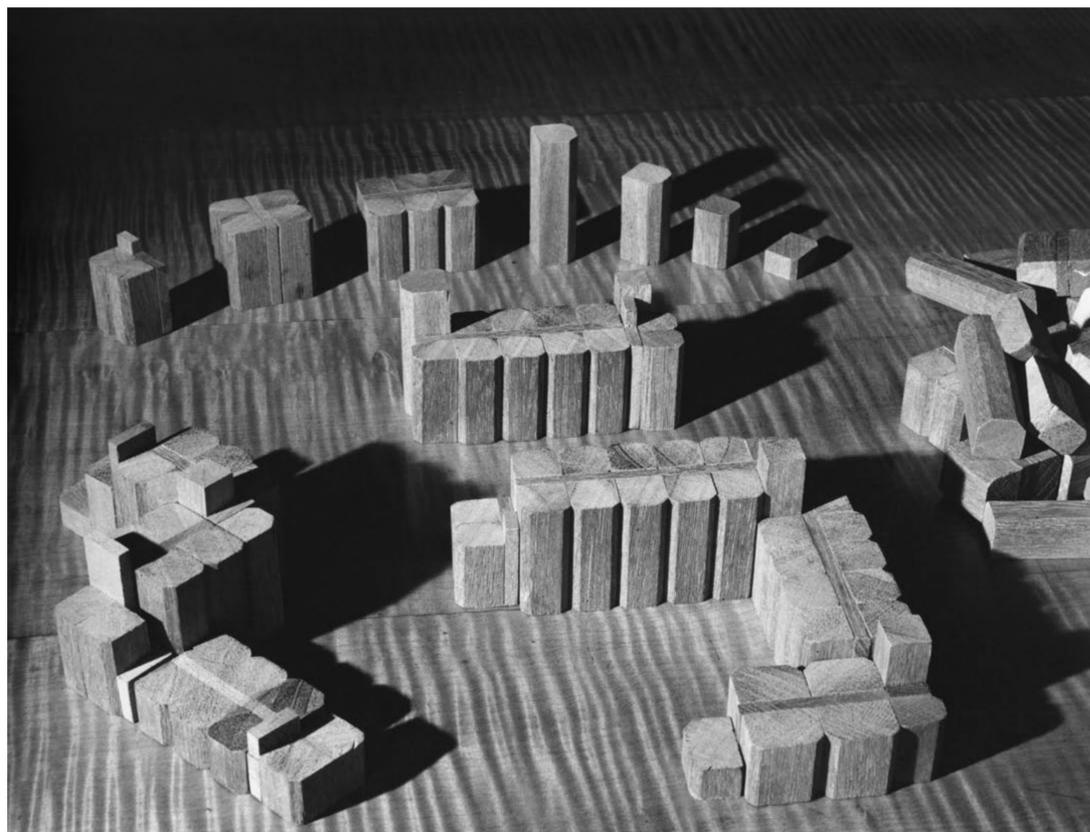
Carousel Park, 1974



Elmwood Square, 1975



Madison Plaza, 1975



"Kit of parts" prototype blocks

Carousel Park, Elmwood Square and Madison Plaza North Tonawanda, Buffalo and Rome, NY 1974 & 1975

In an effort to provide studio and one-bedroom units for the elderly, the architects designed a system allowing replication of buildings at different sites using a common design vocabulary. This was a "kit of parts" -- a box of wooden blocks -- including individual unit types, modular elevator and stair components. Common social spaces, including meeting rooms, a lounge and laundry were also part of the program. By arranging the blocks differently, buildings of various footprints and heights were assembled, allowing variations in plan and spatial configuration.

The structural system consisted of bearing walls and pre-cast planks. This "motel" construction enabled buildings, or sections of buildings, to be of different heights and balconies could be inserted, giving dwelling units a bay window and the facades an expressive chamfer at each stack of apartment modules. The first project to use the replication system, Carousel Park, was completed in 1974. In 1975, other projects, with simple modifications, were completed in Rome and Buffalo. Building heights varied from three to eleven stories and, in the case of the 137-unit Elmwood Park development in Buffalo, retail spaces were introduced on the ground floor. A benefit of the system was that builders could very quickly establish costs for new projects, based on prior projects.

Architect: Prentice & Chan, Ohlhausen // Structural Engineer: Robert Silman Associates // Landscape Architect: Michael Vreeland
Photography © Elliot Fine

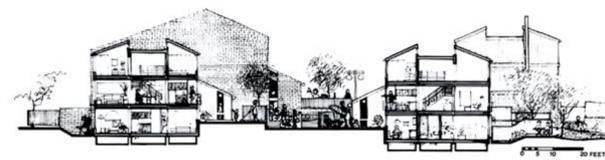
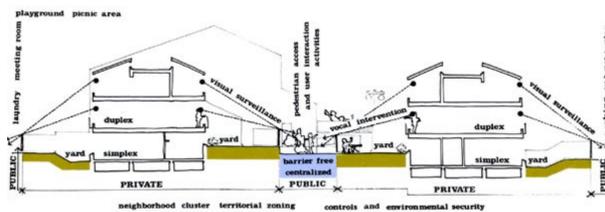
Claremont Gardens

Garden Setting | Modular | Clusters

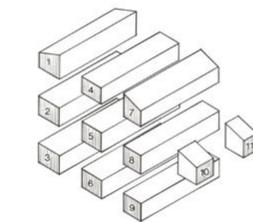


1974

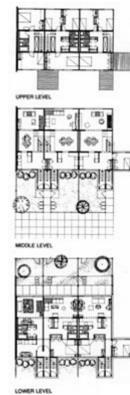
2004



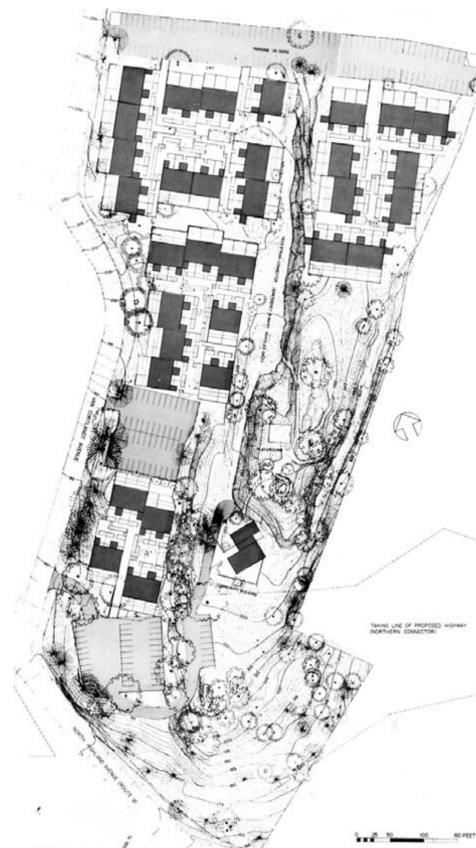
Typical Cluster section



Module Assembly System



Plan, versions A, AE



Site plan

Ossining, NY 1974

The 12-acre wooded hilltop site, with many rock outcroppings and views of the Hudson, was chosen for relocation housing for people displaced by an urban renewal plan in central Ossining. After many meetings with the future residents, a low-rise scheme conforming to the neighborhood scale and utilizing factory-built wood boxes was developed. Size limitations of the factory process and transport vehicles were constraints of the box system. An innovative method of assembly was designed to permit flexible unit sizes and maximum box dimensions. Modules arrived at the site with all interior finishes and fittings in place. Joints between boxes are clearly articulated on the exterior.

The dwelling units are arranged in four clusters, each designed for specific site conditions. Parking and services are in three areas accessed from the street, freeing the residential areas from vehicular traffic. All pedestrian spaces are connected by stairs and ramps, which are used as social recreation areas as well as for circulation. A recreation area was located at the highest part of the ridge, but a community building planned there was never built. The site is convenient to shopping, bus service and schools. The three-story buildings contain predominantly 2, 3 and 4-bedroom units. Utilizing the sloping site, entrances lead one-half level down to simplex apartments with private yards in back, and one-half level up to duplexes with enclosed private yards in front. Apartments for seniors and the disabled have on-grade entrances. There are 184 units on approximately 7 buildable acres, yielding a density of 26.2 units per acre.

Elm Street

Terraced Housing | Modular | Courtyards

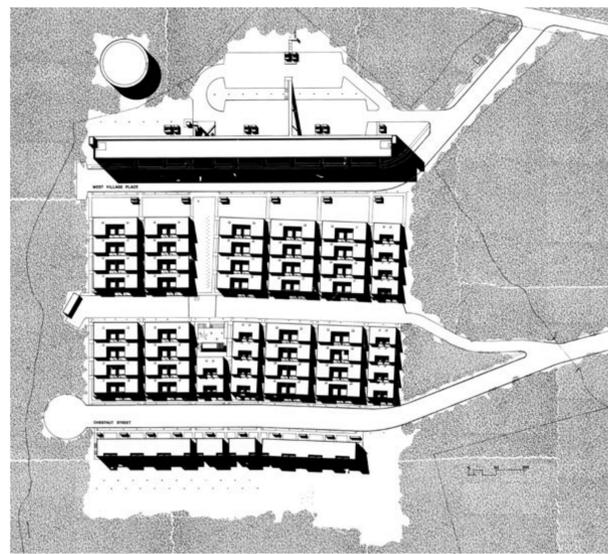


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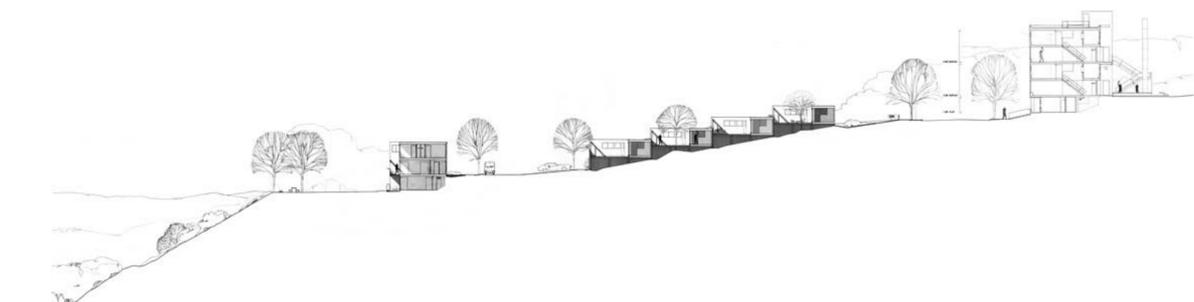
2004



Seligmann conceptual sketches



Site plan



Section

Ithaca, NY 1972

Elm Street Housing is a low-rise, high-density development sited on a steeply sloping hillside in Ithaca, New York. Influenced by the work of Le Corbusier, the architect sought to maximize views and provide a private entrance and exterior space for each unit. At the top of the hill is a mid-rise building with 1- and 2-bedroom duplex units on the four upper floors; the lowest floor accommodates apartments for the elderly. Terracing down the hill are single-story, 1- and 3-bedroom units that constitute a majority of the housing. The terraced units provide direct access from either the living or sleeping areas to a private, outdoor court. At the bottom of the hill are three-story row houses with 4-bedroom duplex units above 1-bedroom units at the lowest grade. These three components are linked by a sequence of public spaces, including a landscaped system of pedestrian streets that provide private entry to each unit. Prefabricated panels and modular housing technology was used to produce the mid-rise bar and the terraced housing.

The scheme provides for 235 dwellings on 17-1/2 acres of land, yielding a density of 29 persons or 13 dwellings per acre. Approximately 38% of the units are 3- and 4-bedroom apartments. Construction was started October 1970 and the buildings were occupied in March 1972.

Architect: Werner Seligmann & Associates // Structural Engineer: Severud, Perrone, Sturm, Conlin & Bandell
 Structural Consultant: Donald P. Greenberg // Mechanical Engineer: Galson & Galson // Landscape Architect: Harold E. Schumm & Associates
 Photography © Nathaniel Lieberman, new photographs top right © Franklin Becker

Pines of Perinton



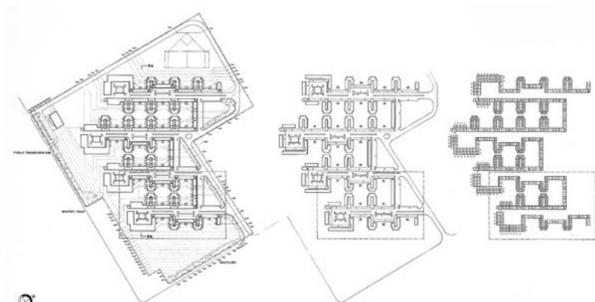
1972



Mews | Cul-de-sacs | Clusters

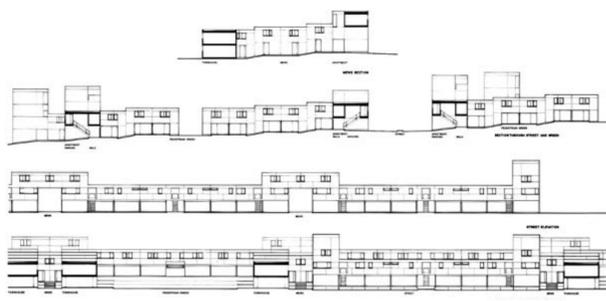
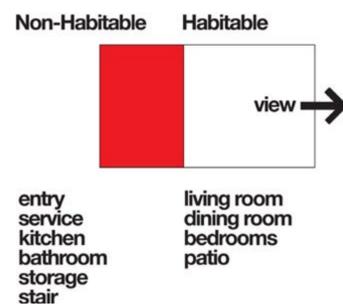


2004, top



Site plan, vehicle circulation, apartment distribution

DWELLING UNIT



Elevation



Apartment plans

Perinton, NY 1972

The 560-unit Pines of Perinton project was one of five new suburban developments in greater Rochester whose goal was to provide housing for low-, moderate- and middle-income families, and the elderly, while providing recreation and open space areas, off-street parking and community facilities. The Perinton development was built on a 43-acre site with easy access to local shopping, bus lines and nearby highways.

The townhouses and garden apartments are arranged in four linear cul-de-sacs, with each cluster containing its own parking area and a semi-enclosed green area. There is a pedestrian circulation system throughout and an active play area in the northwest of the site. Of the 560 units, 120 are reserved for elderly persons and located in the south, accessible to the community center, shopping and buses. The type of construction is slab on grade with pre-fabricated wood wall panels for the townhouses and wood-frame supported by lally columns over parking bays for the apartment units.

One-half of the units were reserved for low- and moderate-income families and elderly persons eligible for subsidies under the federal Section 236 Rent Supplement Program. The other one-half of the units were for residents meeting the New York State Mitchell-Lama income requirements.