

ARCHITECTURAL RECORD

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NEWS (/NEWS) PROJECTS (/PROJECTS) HOUSES (/RESIDENTIAL/) PRODUCTS (/PRODUCTS/)



Photo © Robin Hill

Dr. Kennedy Homes

Glavovic Studio

Fort Lauderdale, Florida

Sunshine State of Mind: A low-income housing project brings together seniors and families in a residential development designed to respect its neighbors and accommodate the sub-tropical climate.

By Clifford A. Pearson

Set between an historic neighborhood of mostly single-family houses on one side and a busy thoroughfare on the other, the Dr. Kennedy Homes—a low-income housing project for both seniors and families—negotiates the differences between competing conditions and interests. Walking around the 8.5-acre site in Fort Lauderdale, you notice what ties the complex together rather than what might pull it apart: the balconies and outdoor walkways that offer residents views of their surroundings, the breezeways and shaded courtyards that connect indoors and out, and the rolling landscape that features more than 440 native trees.



PEOPLE & PRODUCTS

- **Windows:** All American Windows
- **Acrylic Entrances:** 3form
- **Laminated hurricane glass:** Technoglass
- **Glass block:** PPG

The 132-unit project replaced a public housing project from 1941 that consisted of nearly 50 one- and two-story buildings spread out evenly over a superblock, with minimal connections to the rest of the city. Built for whites only, the earlier complex was desegregated in 1968 by federal mandate. When the city Housing Authority proposed demolishing the old concrete-block structures in 2010, some people criticized the plan for ignoring the project's historic value, and others feared that poor residents would be moved out permanently.

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Responding to community concerns, the city kept the number of dwelling units in the new complex the same as before—132—even though Fort Lauderdale needs more affordable housing, and zoning would have allowed 212 units on the site. Glavovic Studio, the local architecture firm hired to design the project, reacted to neighborhood sensitivities as well, placing the two largest buildings along heavily trafficked Broward Boulevard on the north and setting the smallest ones on the south, adjacent to the Sailboat Bend historic district.

Margi Nothard, the founder and design director of Glavovic, had designed mostly civic buildings in the area, including the Young At Art Museum and Broward County Library and the ArtsPark at Young Circle. She lives in Sailboat Bend, so she understood the concerns of the neighbors while also being committed to improving public housing. “I see low-income housing as part of the public realm,” says Nothard. “We need to weave it into the community as a whole.”

So she approached the job as an urban-design challenge, reinforcing Broward Boulevard with a pair of five-story buildings—one for seniors and one for families—and designing two- and three-story structures that have pinwheel-shaped plans and step down to the scale of low-rise neighbors. She wasn't able to reintroduce through streets into the superblock, but she did add a pair of driveways on the east and west to open the project to the rest of the city. She also redesigned the housing project's ground plane, transforming a flat, undifferentiated topography into a more engaging landscape of winding paths, small hills, and planted swales that retain rainwater so the rest of the site stays dry.

“My first charge to Margi,” says Scott Strawbridge, the director of development and facilities for the housing authority, “was to build us a park and then fit housing in it.” One advantage of erecting just 132 units was the amount of green space that it left. According to Strawbridge, 54 percent of the site is open space, and 90 mature canopy trees were preserved, though a few had to be moved. “We located the buildings to accommodate the trees,” which shade the apartments and create attractive places to walk, explains Nothard.

The \$16 million project encompasses eight new apartment buildings and three existing single-story structures renovated as community spaces. Twenty percent of the dwellings house people making 28 percent or less of the area's median income (\$56,400 per year) and 80 percent serve those making 60 percent or less of the AML. Monthly rents range from \$376 for a 650-square-foot one-bedroom unit to \$1,117 for a 1,085-square-foot three-bedroom apartment.

The Fort Lauderdale Housing Authority owns the project, but brought in a private company, Carlisle Development, to build it and operate it jointly with the city for 15 years. Funding came from mostly low-income-housing tax credits, along with some state money and private-equity investment. “We're divorcing ourselves from the old model of public financing and are now partnering with the private sector,” says Strawbridge.

Environmental concerns played an important role in shaping the project, which earned a LEED Gold rating. All of the apartments in the six pinwheel buildings and the great majority of those in the two larger buildings are accessed from single-loaded outdoor hallways, so they enjoy cross-ventilation and daylight from at least two sides. “Most residents here can't afford to run air-conditioning all year round, so catching breezes is important,” says Nothard.

Almost all of the units have a small outdoor space, whether a balcony, terrace, or patio. Security was a critical issue, so Nothard made sure residents at home can see people as they approach from near and far. The site is not fenced, but there are gates at the entrances to covered patios at the center of each pinwheel building, secured lobbies in the big buildings, and surveillance cameras all around. Crime is “way down” from the days of the old project, says Strawbridge. The main complaint now is the size of the units, even though they are larger than before. “I love it here, but I wish it was bigger,” says Shirley Carson, who lives in a 945-square-foot two-bedroom apartment.

With its projecting balconies, dashes of color, and myriad outdoor spaces, the Dr. Kennedy Homes brings the spirit of southern Florida living to people who in the past could rarely afford it.

Architect:

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(954) 524-5728

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Size: 174,300 square feet

Construction Cost: \$16 million

Completion date: March 2014

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