

DeStefano Partners' Joseph Gonzalez, FAIA, designed the Metropolitan Park apartments in Grand Rapids, Mich., to bring a flourish to a neighborhood known as 'Avenue of the Arts.' *Masonry* at the base roots the structure in its traditional surroundings, while zinc and cement board speak of the contemporary goals for the project.



NOT YOUR FATHER'S MODERNISM

Three affordable housing programs are both contextual and contemporary

By Laurie Petersen

All images courtesy of the firms

Until recently, if the terms “modernism” and “affordable housing” were used in the same sentence, there was usually a negative modifier. The disastrous fate of the CHA’s massive projects created an indelible image of soulless slabs looming over forbidding expanses of asphalt. As these projects began to come down in the 1990s, both public and nonprofit developers of affordable housing vowed to recreate traditional neighborhoods. Concrete and punched windows were out; gables, bay windows and front porches were in.

The traditional idiom that was in favor throughout the housing market has been giving way to a more modern expression—but with a respect for context that was often lacking in the era of urban renewal. These three projects demonstrate that shift. Rather than creating isolated objects, they respect and reinforce the scale and proportions of the neighborhood streetscape and the city grid. “We try to make them contextual and modern at the same time,” says Peter Landon, FAIA, of Landon Bone Baker. He adds that residents of affordable housing want their buildings to “fit in” but “want to feel like they are moving forward in the world, too.”

Landon’s Rosa Parks Homes and Johnson & Lee’s Dr. King Legacy Apartments are both under construction in Chicago, where city government has eased its insistence on traditional design elements. Philip Johnson, AIA, says “the success of Millennium Park made Mayor Daley look at modernism again.” In Grand Rapids, Michigan, the government expressly wanted a “cool” contemporary design to lure people back to the city, and Joe Gonzalez, FAIA, was happy to comply. Whether encouraged or merely tolerated by local governments, this new modernism—contemporary in appearance, but hewing to time-tested urban design principles—is changing the face of affordable housing.

Honoring a Legacy

The client for the Dr. King Legacy Apartments, the Lawndale Christian Development Corporation, has taken on the unusual task of creating a historic district without any physical landmarks. Development of the Martin Luther King Memorial District will honor the intangible substance of the site’s history even though the buildings are no longer there.

The exterior of the King apartments updates the neighborhood’s traditional rows of greystones and brick multi-flat buildings. The multi-colored brick is a metaphor for unity among people of different races.



The Dr. King Legacy apartments are part of a planned memorial district honoring Dr. Martin Luther King’s work in Chicago’s ghettos. The U-shaped plan is intended to restore commercial and pedestrian vitality to a one-time shopping district, and provides parking in the rear. King and his family lived in an apartment at about where the word Hamlin is at the bottom of this image.

In 1966 Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. brought his crusade for social justice to the North, choosing Chicago’s overcrowded Lawndale neighborhood as a base for protests against segregation and urban slum conditions. He and his family moved into a three-flat at 1550 S. Hamlin and lived there for several months; it was the only place he ever resided in the North. His activities in Chicago marked his elevation from a regional to a national leader.

The Dr. King Legacy Apartments will anchor the King Memorial District with a mixed-use complex on 16th Street that provides 45 rental units above six commercial spaces. The retail spaces will be leased at affordable rents to local businesses, except for 1550 S. Hamlin, which will be the Martin Luther King Fair Housing Center, featuring permanent and temporary exhibits. Pylons outside the building will describe the historic significance of this address. Other features planned for the four-acre, three-block-long district are a memorial park, a job training center, a library and new trees lining 16th Street.

The parti is essentially a series of connected six-flats wrapping around both side streets to form a central



courtyard that includes parking, bicycle racks and a tot lot. With a module size of 35 by 70 feet, the units are shallower than traditional Chicago six-flats. Each unit has both a front and back door, the latter leading to a small balcony or terrace. The variety of plans includes two-, three- and four-bedroom layouts. Johnson prefers the six-flat configuration to a long shared corridor because “there is less anonymity”—and therefore more security—when only six units share the public spaces. The units will be a mixture of affordable and market rate, with 10 of them designated for Section 8 tenants.

The exterior appearance was driven in part by the client’s desire for, in the words of executive director Kim Jackson, “an important piece of architecture for the neighborhood, with a modern-day twist that takes it to the next level.” Multicolored bricks are a metaphor for King’s message of interracial harmony.

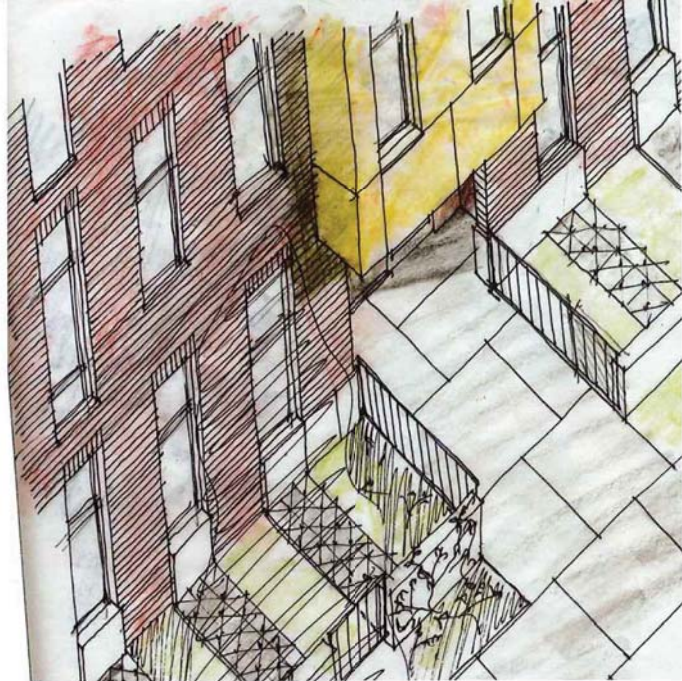
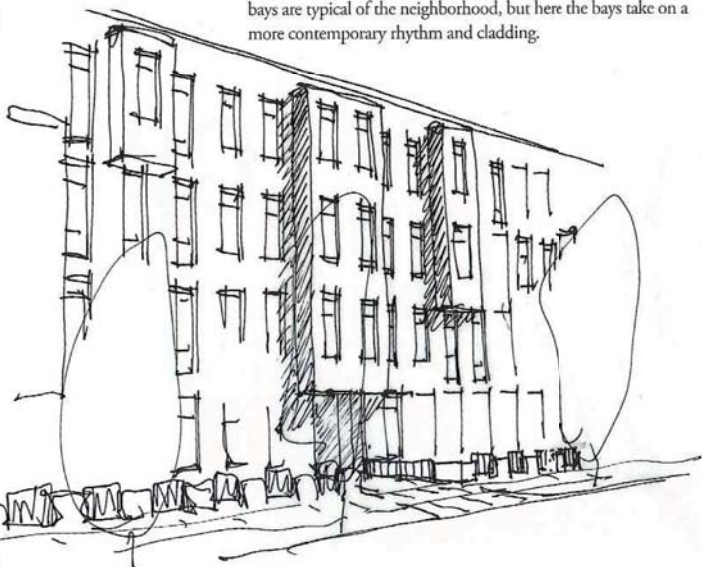
“Green” is also a symbolic color for the project. It will be certified Energy Star rather than LEED Silver, partly to avoid the expenses of paperwork and of commissioning. As a planned development, over 50% of the roof surfaces must be vegetated. Rain barrels at the base of most downspouts provide water to common green spaces at ground level. Tankless water heaters and Energy Star appliances and mechanicals will minimize utility costs, which are paid by the tenants. Jackson points out that housing affordability means “not only the amount of the rent, but how much it costs to stay there.”

Getting Tenants to See Green

Another project named for a civil rights icon, the Rosa Parks Homes consists of eight buildings on scattered sites in the West Humboldt Park neighborhood. There are a total of 94 units, all of them affordable rentals available to households of varying income levels. The majority have two or three bedrooms, to address the scarcity of inexpensive rental apartments suitable for families.

Peter Landon says, “Our firm is trying to figure out how to do a building that is super-green, super-efficient, and affordable—when you put all that together, you get a contemporary building.” The

The design of the Rosa Parks Homes, seen in three images on this page, also updates familiar neighborhood exteriors. Brick faces with bays are typical of the neighborhood, but here the bays take on a more contemporary rhythm and cladding.



process is facilitated by the fact that client Bickerdike Redevelopment Corporation has its own construction company, especially regarding the key goal of energy efficiency: a tight building envelope. Landon states categorically: “the base building is 95% of being green.” He adds that with improvements in insulation and other construction techniques, it has actually become more difficult to get grants for green technology such as geexchange because they now have a relatively smaller financial payback. Landon says that all of the buildings at Rosa Parks are functionally equivalent to LEED Silver, although they are only undertaking the certification process for one of them. That building will include a solar hot water system and eight geexchange wells that supply heat pumps.



Bickerdike manages all its own properties, giving the organization a holistic perspective of sustainability issues. Executive director Joy Arugete points to the need to educate both maintenance staff and residents about green products and technology used in the buildings. Staff must not only learn to operate new equipment, they need to know about appropriate updates when units turn over, such as low VOC paints and carpeting. “Green is not a snapshot in time,” Arugete says. “Where it really counts is over the years.”

Bickerdike has a multipronged approach to educating tenants. A DVD was filmed at the Rosa Parks homes when the first building opened, with the site manager touring residents through the units, showing them the

green features. Newcomers meet with the green tenant organizer to learn everything from how to clean bamboo floors to why the bathrooms have fans with timers rather than on-off switches. Arugete says the emphasis is less on saving the planet than on conveying that “this is a healthy place for you and your kids.”

Their efforts in this area are being aided by Daniel Splaingard, who recently began a 3-year-long Enterprise Rose Architectural Fellowship with the firm. An alumnus of Auburn University and the Rural Studio, Splaingard is updating and improving the tenant manual to include more drawings and graphics.

Splaingard is also Bickerdike’s liaison to archi-treasures, which hopes to conduct community workshops that will result in public art for the buildings. Possibilities include a mosaic depicting Rosa Parks next to one of the front doors or a series of custom-designed posters for the common hallways. He describes the process as “not about ‘making stuff’ but about social engagement through the vehicle of ‘stuff-making.’”

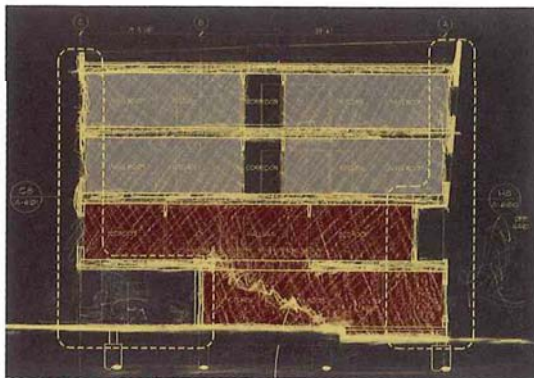
Scaling Up a Michigan Module

In cities that lack Chicago’s vibrancy, affordable housing can be a tool to attract new residents. Under Governor Jennifer Granholm, Michigan launched a “Cool Cities” program to make some of the state’s urban areas appealing to young knowledge workers and creative professionals. The Metropolitan Park Apartments were developed in downtown Grand Rapids to provide distinctive modern housing that is affordable for students and artists, among others.

Designed by Joseph Gonzalez, now a Design Principal at DeStefano Partners, the four-story building has eight three-bedroom townhouses on the first two floors and 16 two-bedroom apartments above. Parking at the back includes covered spaces tucked under the second floor of the building that provide direct access to back doors of the townhouses. The planning module was developed from the 19-foot-6-inch width required by two parking spaces. “The car is often overlooked in planning affordable housing,” Gonzalez says.

The building creates a fresh new image for a neighborhood that has been renamed the “Avenue of the Arts” district. Material choices were guided by the trinity of sustainability, aesthetics and cost. A masonry base provides traditional grounding while horizontal bands of zinc and unadorned planes of cement board convey a modern sensibility. The zinc panels are cost-effective because their width is that of a standard coil. Kalwall is used for the vertical circulation zone to provide natural light to the common areas.

Thoughtful massing creates a lively street façade at minimal cost. The townhouses have individual entries that engage the sidewalk, and recessed terraces above. Bright red vertical panels separate each pair of two-story units, providing an inexpensive shot of color. Further interest is provided by the angled profile of the upper floors and by the recessed “slot” of the common entrance. Working with the developer and contractor from the outset, construction costs were held to \$90 per square foot.



Gonzalez envisions the Metropolitan Park model being adapted to different settings and configurations. The design (seen in section) calls for retail or commercial space on the two lower levels.

“With the success of Metropolitan Park, we thought of other places we could apply this modular plan, and realized it lends itself to the standard Chicago block,” Gonzalez says. He developed schemes for full, half or quarter blocks with different heights, parking arrangements, façade designs and ground floor options that include retail. The height could be increased and additional parking provided underground; by going down half a level, green space would be created on the roof of the parking deck. If the first floor was commercial space, the floor above could be an office or studio, or combined into a double-height venue for a restaurant or gallery.

The scheme could even be expanded to create an entire neighborhood. Gonzalez developed a concept for the proposed Olympic Village on the site of the former Michael Reese Hospital. Similar to the 2016 plan, his proposal maintains Chicago’s street grid but replaces the series of residential towers with buildings of varying configurations and heights, creating a pedestrian-friendly neighborhood. Education, retail, library, park and sports functions complement the housing component to create a comprehensive community environment. His plan is designed as individual blocks that could be developed by different entities. CA

Between modules at Metropolitan Park, Kalwall panels allow natural light into vertical circulation areas. Red panels that divide one home from another provide a dash of bold color.

