



ISSUES AND IDEAS

**Federal Home Loan Bank
of Boston**

Accenting 'Delight' in Neighborhood Design

BY DAVID P. PARISH

Since 1990, the Federal Home Loan Bank of Boston has committed more than \$156 million to help fund more than 17,000 units of affordable housing throughout New England.

Although affordable housing, in fact, can strengthen the physical, social and economic fabric of communities, neighborhood resistance continues to be a significant barrier. Good design, while not completely overcoming neighborhood objections, can be an important factor in gaining acceptance for a project.

With this idea in mind, the Federal Home Loan Bank of Boston (www.fhlbboston.com) has dedicated resources to encourage thoughtful approaches in designing affordable housing. This article highlights a number of those approaches.

Assisting HUD's Design Advisor

In June 1999, the Federal Home Loan Bank of Boston joined with Neighborhood Reinvestment, the American Institute of Architects, The Enterprise Foundation, the Local Initiatives Support Corporation, and the National Congress for Community Economic Development to become the Advisory Group for the Affordable Housing Design Advisor.

Funded by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, the Design Advisor is a resource to help organizations improve the design of affordable housing.

From the beginning, the Advisory Group was committed to the development of a tool to guide the design process, rather than mandate assumed elements of good design. The Advisory Group agreed that a project would be well designed if it "meets user needs, understands and responds to its context, enhances its neighborhood, and is built to last."

The Design Advisor was concerned with how a development organization responds to these

four criteria. The Web-based tool (www.designadvisor.org) that emerged from the Advisory Group discussions, under the leadership of Project Manager Deane Evans, provides a wealth of information and illustrations to assist development organizations with housing designs.

As the Design Advisor Web site says, “Good design can make a world of difference for the people who will live in the affordable housing you help build, and for the neighborhood surrounding it. The Affordable Housing Design Advisor is here to help you at every step.”

For its part, the Federal Home Loan Bank of Boston encourages applicants to its Affordable Housing Program to review the tools and resources offered by the Design Advisor before submitting projects for funding.

Focusing on Greater Boston

To draw attention to the need for affordable housing in Greater Boston, and to provide an opportunity for local college and university students to contribute to the development process, the Federal Home Loan Bank of Boston and the Citizens’ Housing and Planning Association (CHAPA, www.chapa.org) organized the Affordable Housing Development Competition, in the fall of 2000.

The annual competition brings together students with varying interests and from diverse academic backgrounds. Each development team includes representatives from at least two schools and members with expertise in the various disciplines required by the proposal.

Each team is paired with a development organization, which provides a feasible design site and information on the location, and a faculty advisor, who provides guidance and advice. Once this framework is established, the teams create a rehabilitation or development plan for the site.

Modeled after a professional proposal, the finished product is judged by interdisciplinary authorities on housing and urban planning. The two winning teams receive a cash prize, to be distributed to the students and the development organization.

Even in its first year, the competition was an unqualified success. Students from six universities formed five teams to develop sites in various Boston-area communities. Seven development organizations also participated.

Each plan was unique to its location and in its treatment of difficult issues. The plans also showed a strong commitment to the development of quality affordable housing. With the exception of the

guidance provided by the Federal Home Loan Bank of Boston and CHAPA, the competition was entirely student run.

During 2002, a series of seminars on the design and development of affordable housing was introduced as part of the competition process, including a session on the use of the Design Advisor.

Interest in the competition by students and local development organizations has continued to grow. Six teams and more than 40 students are currently at work on a variety of innovative housing developments.

Supporting Smart Growth

Growth is an inevitable consequence of a healthy, market-based economy, but not all growth has the same result. “Smart Growth” is the ability to harness the positive aspects of growth while minimizing its negative impacts.

To foster a positive business climate that leads to stronger communities and the production of housing for all of the region’s residents, the Federal Home Loan Bank of Boston has been active in the discussion of smart growth in New England.

In another partnership with CHAPA, the bank also has participated in the development of a set of smart-growth principles. Drawn from several sources, these ideas provide guidance to development organizations and communities that are rethinking their approach to growth. The document urges citizens of Massachusetts to take the following actions:

- ▶ Promote efficient land use through development of compact communities with a lively mix of uses, including housing, businesses and shops, and civic and open spaces. Such uses should encourage walking, reduce the use of automobiles, support public transit, and minimize loss of open space.
- ▶ Promote regional land-use planning and transportation options, and coordinate local development with these plans.
- ▶ Encourage a tax policy that reduces a community’s dependence on local property taxes and the competition for high-tax-value land uses.
- ▶ Encourage plans and policies that allow all communities within a region to share in the benefits and responsibilities of growth.
- ▶ Promote diverse housing types in all communities to enable individuals and households from a wide range of economic levels, cultures and age groups to live and work within their boundaries.
- ▶ Foster a strong sense of place by considering the history, environment, resources and character of



communities when planning new developments.

- ▶ Promote development that makes use of existing infrastructure by rehabilitating structures, cleaning and reusing contaminated sites, and building on infill parcels. Encourage development that conserves resources, minimizes waste, promotes health, and enhances local communities.

- ▶ Consider the impact of development on larger ecosystems, and, wherever possible, preserve the natural terrain, wildlife habitat, drainage and vegetation of a community and region. Permanently protect superior examples of these natural environments and promote special protections for working landscapes – farms, forests and waterfronts.

- ▶ Establish development-decision-making processes that are open, predictable, fair and cost-effective.

- ▶ Promote communities of diversity and delight.

Borrowing a Musical Concept

The list concludes by urging communities of “diversity and delight.” Although the concept of “delight” doesn’t typically appear on a list of specifications for housing development, it clearly should.

While introducing “delight” into a discussion of neighborhood development may seem unconventional, it is helpful. It may also be instructive to introduce an even more remote concept – this one drawn from baroque music – sonata form.

Sonata form is a type of musical composition that involves a theme, exposition, recapitulation and, with a little luck, a satisfying ending (a form many of us hope our lives also will take). In the best examples, a skilled composer provides the comfort of recognition, as well as the delight of small surprises, within an expected context. In neighborhood-development terms, a good designer can do the same for a neighborhood.

As neighborhoods grow, for example, they often develop an architectural theme. Scale, materials, color and a variety of other components coalesce to create it. Exposition, then, expands upon and varies the theme, while recapitulation – involving the role of the designer – recognizes and builds upon what has gone before.

Delight is the recognition of details that honor and expand the basic theme. Without a sophisticated understanding of context, newly introduced physical features can be discordant and destabilizing. They may take the form of poorly conceived buildings or the deterioration of existing patterns, such as broken curbs and sidewalks, pitted streets,

and burned-out lights.

Though it’s impossible to fully explain the sense of well-being and delight good music can produce, it may be connected to the comfort we feel in repetition and symmetry. Similarly, a physical environment that provides elements of continuity, accented by instances of pleasant surprise, can also lead to a sense of delight and comfort in our surroundings.

Conclusion

Developers and others concerned with neighborhood development and reinvestment need to be attentive to the full range of neighborhood issues, including schools, crime control, and employment. But they also need to be aware of the impact that the physical environment has on our behavior.

Often we aren’t fully conscious of the patterns of our physical environment, just as we aren’t fully conscious of certain themes buried in a piece of music. A perceived harmony in the environment can lead to a sense of comfort, just as discord can lead to anxiety.

And this delight in physical harmony doesn’t depend on opulence. Just as a simple song may be as satisfying as a symphony, a neighborhood with modest housing may satisfy residents as much as one with the grandest homes.

Although neighborhoods and their physical design elements are too complex to be manipulated with any great assurance, it may be worthwhile to consider how individual elements, such as housing, result in environments that are experienced with pleasure. Desirable neighborhoods produce economic value for residents and the larger community.

While change is often threatening, a strong economy depends upon growth. In order for us to become comfortable with growth, we must raise the bar for new development – from grudging acceptance to delight. ■

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BY CATHERINE A. SMITH

Seattle Voters Earmark a Property Tax Levy for Low-Income Housing Production

Two current and one former NeighborWorks® executive directors were instrumental in helping convince voters in Seattle to approve a tax increase in support of lower-income housing. On September 17, 2002, voters approved a measure that increased property taxes by an average of \$15 per homeowner. It will generate \$86 million over seven years for the preservation and creation of affordable housing.

“Seattle is definitely unique in voting to tax itself to provide for people’s shelter,” said Dorothy Lengyel, executive director of HomeSight, a NeighborWorks® organization. “I think it’s pretty amazing.”

Seattle’s voters initially supported the financing of affordable housing in 1981, with a bond issue, and then assessed housing levies in 1986 and 1995. Raising the funds through an annual tax levy avoids the interest and underwriting costs of a bond issue.

Lengyel served on the mayor’s citizens advisory committee, which made recommendations regarding the size of the levy and its term. Beforehand, the committee held stakeholder focus groups, examined best practices from other communities, and considered the state of Seattle’s economy (currently in recession, with one of the highest unemployment rates in the country).

The committee put forth its proposal to then-Mayor Norm Rice, who “put his mark on it and advanced it to the city council,” Lengyel said.

Getting the measure passed was not without its challenges. *The Seattle Times* opposed the levy, and there was some opposition on the city council. But a

large coalition of organizations and individuals rallied around a campaign called Yes For Homes to educate voters and get them to the polls.

‘Yes for Homes’ Coalition

Endorsements rolled in from the Seattle Chamber of Commerce, labor unions, and grassroots organizations – including members of the Housing Development Consortium of Seattle-King County (www.hdc-kingcounty.org), a trade association for area nonprofit housing developers. Founded in 1988, the consortium has 29 nonprofit members, 28 associate members (which include banks, corporations and others), and two government agencies, the King County Housing and Community Development Program and the Seattle Office of Housing. All worked hard in support of the levy.

While “being careful not to use public funds or public facilities to do so,” Lengyel said, she and the rest of HomeSight’s staff worked hard on the Yes For Homes campaign. They manned phone banks, helped send out direct mail, put yard signs in people’s yards, and even designed a float that focused on home ownership and the levy for the annual Rainier Valley parade.

Also working hard over two years of preparation for the vote was Cynthia Parker, director of Seattle’s office of housing and former executive director of Anchorage Neighborhood Housing Services. (She has just resigned her city post to become a vice president at Seattle Northwest Securities Corporation, where, she said, she “will set up an



affordable-housing group.”)

The department of housing “collected all the data and staffed the effort that went into the recommendations of the citizens advisory committee,” Parker said. She and her staff worked closely with the mayor and city-agency staff and “did our homework” in order to put all the necessary facts and figures in front of the city council members and the voters. She also worked as a volunteer on her own time.

George Staggers, executive director of the **Central Area Development Association** (CADA, also a NeighborWorks® organization) was appointed by former Mayor Norm Rice to the Housing Levy Oversight Committee, which was responsible for overseeing expenditures of the previous tax levy. His support for the new levy was unequivocal.

How the Funds Will Be Used

The largest share of the funds generated by the levy – \$56 million – will be used to build or preserve rental housing, and half of that is slated to help the city’s poorest residents (those earning less than 30 percent of median income). “We have more than 40,000 people paying more than 30 percent for their rent,” Parker said.

Another \$7.8 million will support home ownership, \$2.8 million will provide for short-term emergency rental assistance, and \$7.2 million will be placed in a special fund for mixed-use and mixed-income projects.

Remaining funds are to be used for administration and operating and maintenance subsidies that will enable rental units to be affordable to extremely low-income families and people with disabilities.

The new levy is expected to produce or preserve 1,718 units of housing, help 326 families buy homes, and assist 533 renters.

Help with affordable housing is critical in the Seattle area, where the median house price as of March 2002 in King County reached \$272,000. (According to Parker, the city’s median house price reached \$258,600.) While median household income is relatively high (\$77,900), there are more than 40,000 people in the city of Seattle alone who are paying more than 30 percent of their income on rent.

But there is good news as well: The housing market has a significant number of homes – nearly 30,000 – whose value is well under the city’s median (according to 2000 census data). This opens up opportunities for home ownership for those families earning between 60 and 80 percent of median, who have access to about 40 percent of the levy funds.

HomeSight and CADA are both requesting levy funds. “Our plan is to use the new levy funds for our revolving loan fund, which supports not just housing-development projects but also individual transactions that occur in our target areas,” said Lengyel. According to Staggers, CADA will submit proposals for mixed-income developments that also typically include commercial development. ■

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