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EXTREME MAKEOVER

Designers hope to address many of the past ills of public housing by reconnecting the complexes with the surrounding neighborhoods

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By Katy Reckdahl Staff writer

As longtime residents of the Lafitte public housing complex discussed what should replace the solid brick buildings they'd called home before Hurricane Katrina, it became clear that the design of their new homes was entwined with the quality of life they wanted.

Resident council President Emelda Paul pictured cottages that, except for their age, largely matched the surrounding 6th Ward neighborhood -- each with its own little yard.

At night, she hoped that the air would ring with parents calling their children for dinner.

Similarly, building designs -- and the social conditions they are thought to foster -- were intertwined in the fierce debate that led up to last year's demolition of the so-called Big Four: Lafitte, B.W. Cooper, C.J. Peete, and St. Bernard.

"We believe they (public housing residents) deserve better than the crumbling 'bricks,' " said Donna White, spokeswoman for the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, during the agency's high-profile demolition push. HUD spokespeople also referred to the structures as "outdated buildings which basically warehoused poor people."

In the end, the big brick buildings met their fate partly because they were outmoded. In the eyes of HUD officials and many experts, they no longer looked the way public housing should, and their passé design contributed to the complexes' struggles with crime and deferred maintenance. Some argue that new mixed-income enclaves built atop the old public housing sites may have more resistance to those troubles, because of now-standard features such as separate entrances and yards for each family.

Sociologists and policymakers are closely watching the overhaul of complexes like these, to help answer a vexing question: How many of the ills common to public housing were attributable to the physical environment, as opposed to less tangible forces such as concentrated poverty, poor management and a general lack of opportunity?

--- Islands of tranquility ---

In 1941, as part of an aggressive national effort to build public housing for the poor, the Housing Authority of New Orleans opened several New Orleans developments, including Calliope, which would be renamed B.W. Cooper; Lafitte; and Magnolia, which became C.J. Peete. St. Bernard opened soon afterward in two parts, finished in 1942 and 1953.

In keeping with the thinking of the time, the Big Four complexes were built on "superblocks," meant to be islands of tranquility, insulated from the negative influences of adjacent neighborhoods.

Planners believed that, by removing public streets from the housing sites, "tenants would be assured of peace, safety and quiet," according to reports prepared for the City Planning Commission last year.

The wide public spaces that surrounded the uniform brick buildings were envisioned as village greens that would be cared for by all. Instead, the lawns often became scruffy no-man's lands, where children played in the dust near drug dealers operating in the cuts between buildings.

It's now believed that residents will watch over smaller, semi-private spaces near their own doors, but that earlier public housing designs -- which emphasized vast common areas -- exacerbated problems with crime and made upkeep difficult, especially as public housing budgets declined.

So big lawns are out.

"Openness, so prized earlier, is now seen as a severe problem," wrote Karen Franck, a professor of architecture at the New Jersey Institute of Technology, of changing public housing design.

And no more will barriers and dead-end city streets separate public housing developments from nearby blocks.

When one developer proposed a new neutral ground on one of the development's borders, city planners said no, because, they wrote, reconnecting the site with the neighborhood was a "foremost goal" of planners.

--- 'It was too congested' ---

Emelda Paul was in grade school when the brick Lafitte development was built in 1941. "We thought the Lafitte and the other new complexes were wonderful," said Paul, now 74.

As an adult, Paul moved in, living there for nearly 30 years. There, she saw the design didn't work, she "It was too congested," she said.

So after Hurricane Katrina, when HUD announced plans to demolish the Big Four, Paul made sure she and other former residents were at the planning table -- even though most were still displaced in other cities. Throughout the process, Lafitte residents talked with developers Providence Community Housing and Enterprise Community Partners, exerting influence they'd never had with the Housing Authority of New Orleans, Paul said.

Their requests jibed with the way public housing is being redesigned nationwide, with reconnected street grids and a variety of smaller-scale buildings, each with its own yard.

But Lafitte residents went further. They asked for -- and got -- single-family cottages and shotgun-style singles and doubles, with porches and traditional architectural filigree.

--- High-rises demolished ---

Across the nation, the most-vilified public housing designs were modernistic high-rises like Pruitt-Igoe in St. Louis and the Robert Taylor Homes in Chicago. Most have been flattened.

The closest New Orleans got to this style of construction for public housing families was with the 13-story William J. Fischer tower in Algiers, which was built in the mid-1960s and was imploded in 2004 after it became a dysfunctional mess of stalled elevators, broken windows and gun violence.

As a City Council demolition vote for the Big Four crept closer in December 2007, preservationists such as Richard Moe, president of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, argued for "selective demolition," championing some of the threatened buildings as solidly built, garden-style apartments modeled after the historic Pontalba apartments at Jackson Square.

Moe argued for a mix of new and older, rehabbed buildings on more privatized grounds.

The arguments will likely be revisited for decades, especially if the new construction is deemed flimsy or out of place. But, despite differing views about architecture, nearly everyone involved seemed to agree on certain points: Individual apartments were too small and the complexes too big, dense and isolated.

Together, Moe and others said, the conditions had created a "resounding disaster."

--- Discouraging drug violence ---

Ask nearly any public housing resident about pre-Katrina conditions, and one problem trumps all others: drugs, most often sold in U-shaped back driveways suited for drive-through deals. With the drugs came violence.

"The key issue for public housing tenants is almost always security or safety," said Larry Vale, head of urban studies and planning at Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

In 1996, HUD adopted public housing design principles that supported the concept of "defensible space," where grounds and corridors are subdivided into pieces linked to individual buildings.

After a complex is redeveloped according to these principles, Vale has heard residents say they feel safer and don't worry about lawn chairs being stolen from their private yards.

But improved design must go hand in hand with strong management, Vale said.

"Whenever I have asked residents whether a redeveloped site still 'looks like public housing,' they have had a hard time distinguishing between an architectural answer and a social one," he said. Despite new buildings, the stigma remained if people felt the "wrong" kind of behavior persisted, he said.

Recently, the St. Bernard developer, Columbia Residential, tried to distance itself from that stigma, though one-third of the development's new apartments will have rents set at public housing levels. "This will not be the redeveloped St. Bernard. This will be a high-end residential neighborhood built where St. Bernard once stood," Columbia spokesman Rick White said.

As that developer's concerns make clear, the reinvention of public housing rests on much more than attractive architecture.

At a few of the changing developments, notably C.J. Peete and Lafitte, caseworkers work with former residents to help them find better jobs, get GEDs, improve health and move toward more stable situations.

New construction isn't enough, said Jocquelyn Marshall, resident council president for C.J. Peete.

"We aren't just transforming buildings," she said. "We're transforming lives."

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