

# GOOD DESIGN

The Best Kept Secret in  
Community Development

*is available online at the*

LISC Online Resource Library: [www.lisc.org/resources](http://www.lisc.org/resources)

Printed copies can be ordered at: [publications@lisc.org](mailto:publications@lisc.org)

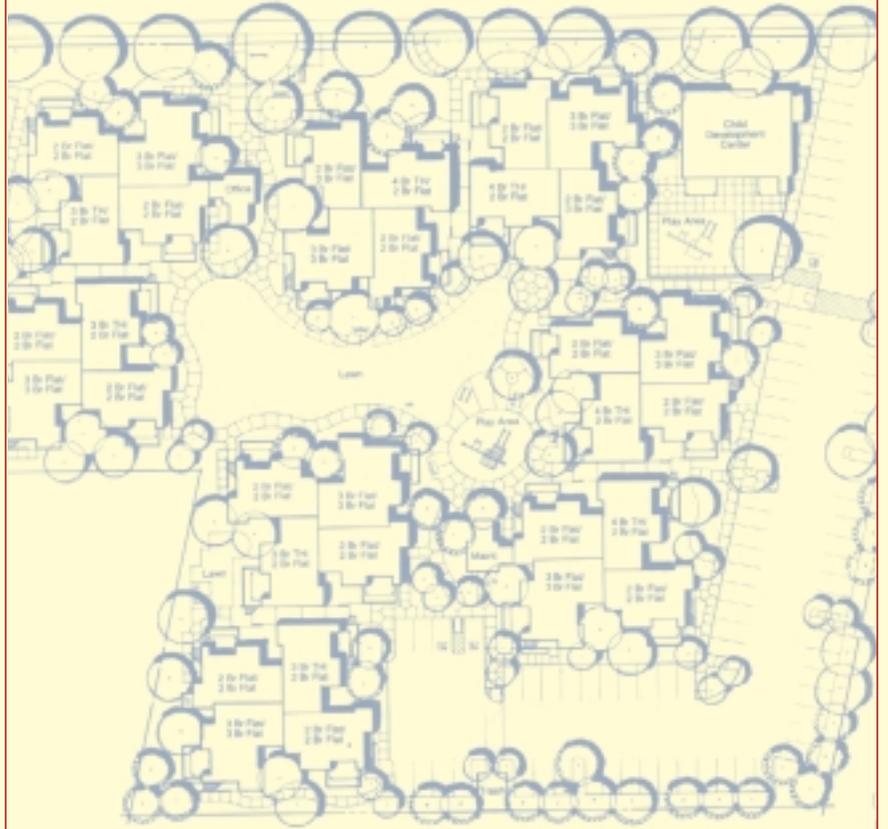
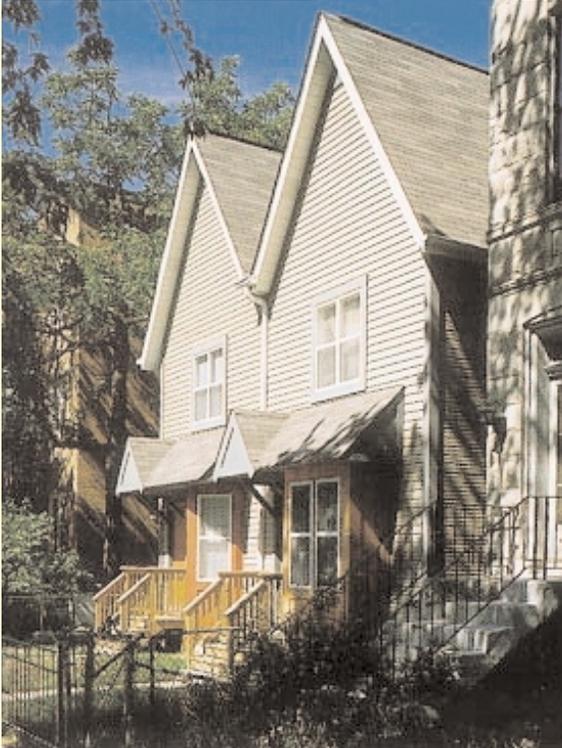


501 7th Avenue  
New York, NY 10018  
212.455.9800  
[www.lisc.org](http://www.lisc.org)

LOCAL INITIATIVES SUPPORT CORPORATION

# GOOD DESIGN

The Best Kept Secret in  
Community Development



**citigroup**

**LISC**

*Helping neighbors  
build communities*

## LOCAL INITIATIVES SUPPORT CORPORATION

Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC) is dedicated to helping nonprofit community development corporations (CDCs) transform distressed neighborhoods into healthy communities of choice and opportunity – good places to work, do business, and raise children. LISC mobilizes corporate, government, and philanthropic support to provide CDCs with:

- loans, grants, and equity investments.
- technical and management assistance.
- local, statewide, and national policy support.

LISC is a national organization with a community focus. Our program staff are based in every city and many of the rural areas where LISC-supported community development takes shape. In collaboration with CDCs, LISC staff help identify local priorities and challenges, delivering the most appropriate support to meet local needs.

Since 1980, LISC has marshaled more than \$5.7 billion from 3,100 investors, lenders, and donors. In over 300 urban and rural communities nationwide, LISC has helped 2,400 CDCs build or rehabilitate more than 147,000 affordable homes and almost 22 million square feet of retail, community, and educational space – totaling almost \$13 billion in development. As a result, hundreds of thousands of people have better lives and brighter futures.

Visit [www.lisc.org](http://www.lisc.org) for more information about LISC.

# GOOD DESIGN

## The Best Kept Secret in Community Development

Published by Local Initiatives Support Corporation  
November 2004

Written by Deane Evans, FAIA and Jody Beck  
New Jersey Institute of Technology Center for Architecture and Building Science Research



### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

LISC wishes to thank the Citigroup Foundation for sponsoring this paper and generously supporting LISC's Organizational Development Initiative and its Research and Evaluation unit. Citigroup, the preeminent global financial services company, does business in more than 100 countries, providing consumers, corporations, governments, and institutions with a broad range of financial products and services, including consumer banking and credit, corporate and investment banking, insurance, securities brokerage, and asset management. The Citigroup Foundation focuses its grants primarily in three areas: financial education, educating the next generation, and building communities and entrepreneurs.

LISC is also grateful that the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and Living Cities: The National Community Development Initiative helped fund this publication.

The authors and publisher are solely responsible for the accuracy of the statements and interpretations contained herein. Such interpretations do not necessarily reflect the views of Citigroup, the federal government, or Living Cities.



**M**any people think that, to be affordable, housing must sacrifice “frills” such as good design. Indeed, affordable housing projects often seem to be developed as if the goal was no design, or as little as possible, without regard for what the buildings look like, how they’re situated, their relationship to open space, or any of the other elements that define good design.

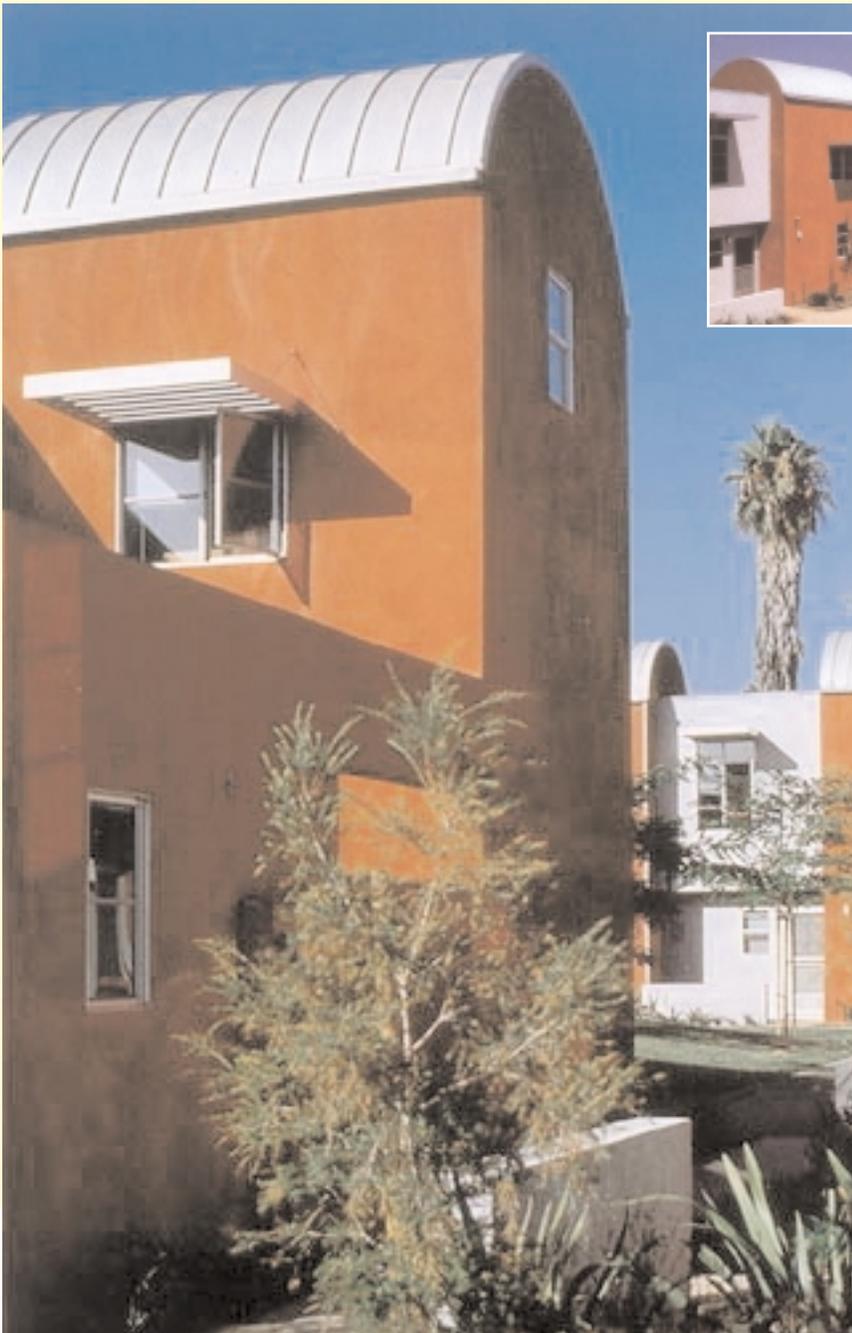
**Great design is often considered a luxury found in expensive houses with high-priced architects.**

But good design can be the critical difference between an affordable development that succeeds—one that satisfies its residents and neighbors, enhances the community where it is built, and remains a stable part of that community long after the ribbon is cut—and one that doesn’t.

LISC supports the notion that good design can be a potent weapon in overcoming the strong, increasingly well-organized opposition that faces affordable housing developments across the country. While much of this opposition is self-serving and shortsighted, legitimate concerns may exist about the design quality of proposed developments. A legacy of large, poorly designed affordable housing projects has been firmly established in the public imagination, and this is what opponents often envision when a new development is proposed.

This perception, coupled with the low level of design quality that characterizes much of the nation’s affordable housing, perpetuates the resistance to new affordable housing; decreases neighborhood stability; and diminishes rather than expands the opportunities for creating high-quality, affordable housing.

The most direct way to fight this perception—and to overcome at least one key argument of affordable housing opponents—is to strive for good design in every development. Indeed, higher design quality may be the single most cost-effective strategy currently available to improve the quality, asset value, and acceptance of affordable housing. Housing development funds are not likely to rise; land acquisition and construction costs are not likely to fall; and regulations are not likely to become less burdensome. In the face of these constraints, better design is an effective option for improving the quantity and quality of affordable housing in America and leveraging limited resources, such as U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) HOME dollars, that support this work. This isn’t just a theory. Examples of well-designed, highly effective affordable housing—many supported directly by LISC—are proving it right now in communities across the country.



### **DAYBREAK GROVE**

City officials encouraged innovative design as a way to make sure that this 13-unit, low-income housing development in Escondido, Calif., didn't look "low budget." The result is a showcase project—featuring striking forms and colors combined with a traditional, bungalow style courtyard plan—that works well for residents and neighbors.

LISC recognizes the benefits of good design and will continue to provide access to information, tools, and training that can help community development corporations (CDCs) produce well-designed developments.

This publication describes what good design is, why it's essential to affordable housing that works, and who's responsible for making it happen. The information here, and much more, is part of an important new tool, The Affordable Housing Design Advisor, which HUD created with help from LISC and other leading national community development organizations. The Affordable Housing Design Advisor is a website, a design tool, a database, and a unique resource of real-world examples and experience that can help any community developer achieve better-designed affordable housing (see sidebar on page 6).

# What Good Design Is

## Good design is essential

Good design is not an amenity that gets added to a development if sufficient funds exist or, more likely, gets cut to reduce costs. From the ground up, good design is an essential part of any successful affordable housing development. Paths and walkways that are pleasurable to use; a visually complex and interesting building façade; open spaces designed like “outdoor rooms;” unit layouts that give all rooms access to daylight and views; parking plans that minimize conflicts between vehicles and pedestrians—these and many other design elements contribute directly to the quality and livability of a development. They are, in fact, the basic fabric of successful places and communities—a fabric that can exist only if good design is a central component of the development process.

## Good design is more than aesthetics

The common assumption is that good design basically means a better looking, more aesthetically pleasing building. While aesthetics is a component of a well-designed development, it is by no means the only—or even the most important—aspect. On the contrary, quality design encompasses a wide range of considerations that go well beyond what a building looks like. These include access to light, air, views, pleasant circulation patterns and spaces that are safe, easy to maintain, and suitable for the activities that take place in them. Successfully integrating all these considerations is necessary to create affordable housing that benefits its residents and adds lasting value to its community. Beauty (aesthetics) really is only skin deep. Good design goes much deeper—to the heart of successful community development.

## OPEN DOORS

Everything in this 64-unit, family housing development in Los Gatos, Calif.—from the placement of the units along the meandering pathway, to the use of “pop-out” windows, to the balconies and fenced porches—is well designed. The result is a project that transforms what are basically very simple buildings into a development that is something special—for residents and the surrounding community.



## Good design requires a good design process

The word “design” can sometimes be confusing. It isn’t just a sketch or a blueprint. Design involves a process that unfolds over the full life of a development and is intrinsic to its success or failure. The process will involve not only the architect, but the developer, the manager, the community, even, in the best cases, some of the people who will be living there. The result can be anything from a bench or a fountain to a park or an entire development. How well or poorly the result works for its users and its community is a direct function of how well (or poorly) the design process has been managed.

While it’s not possible for community developers to simply go out and buy good design and add it to a development, it is possible (and necessary) for community developers to manage the design process so that a well-designed development is the result.

### LYTON PARK PLACE

Simple components—traditional massing, bay windows, front porches, and horizontal siding—help these affordable, single-family homes in St. Paul, Minn., fit in with their turn-of-the-century neighbors.



## Good design is fun and interactive

Many community developers may consider the design process—and even the design profession—to be daunting and intimidating. As architects, even we find the language of design confusing, hard to understand, and occasionally irritating. That’s unfortunate, because the process of design is actually a lot of fun. It involves making choices, solving problems, and interacting with a variety of people—inside and outside the design team—all leading to a real building or set of buildings in the real world.

How will these buildings be entered? Will the entrances be at ground level or have steps and front porches? How high will the porches be and how many steps will it take to reach them? Will they be wide enough for several people to sit comfortably? What type of railing will the porch have? Can you see through it and over it? Can people see you? What will the porches and the steps be made of? What color will they be? Where will the front door be located and what will it be made of? Will the whole assembly—steps, porch, railing, door—say “welcome to my home?”

Asking and answering such questions is what design is all about, when it’s done right. The focus is on people: how they live, work, play, and socialize, and how buildings can be crafted to help them do all these things better. If it sounds like an interesting process, that’s because it is. Just ask community developers who’ve tried it. The process can be extremely rewarding as well, and every member of the development team—not just the designers—should demand the opportunity to participate in it.

# What Good Design Does

The **Affordable Housing Design Advisor** is a new web-based tool—created by HUD with funding and support from LISC and other national community development organizations—that can help the developers of affordable housing better understand the value of good design and how they can achieve it in their own developments. Based on real world experience and case studies of successful developments from all over the country, the **Design Advisor** contains a wealth of information, including: a gallery of more than 80 case studies; a detailed, 20-step procedure for ensuring that design excellence is built into every step of the development process; and a compendium of more than 60 design considerations—ideas that can help guide and enrich the design process.



The **Design Advisor** can be accessed at [www.designadvisor.org](http://www.designadvisor.org).

## Good design ensures the creation of developments that work

The goal of a good design process is to create developments that:

- Meet the needs of occupants.
- Understand and respond to the building's physical context.
- Enhance their neighborhoods.
- Are built to last.

Using these four criteria to measure design excellence may surprise some readers. There's no mention of aesthetics; no concern with getting published in design magazines or winning design awards (nice side benefits, but never core objectives). Rather, these criteria focus on results that provide direct, tangible benefits to the occupants of an affordable housing development and their neighbors.

## Meeting occupant needs

Well-designed developments respond to the needs of their occupants and dictate what the physical design should be. One size definitely does not fit all. Families with children may need larger homes with more bedrooms, spacious kitchens, and more storage. Elderly people living alone, on the other hand, may need less space but require that space to be designed with accessibility issues in mind.

## Understanding context

Although the context in which an affordable housing development is brought to life includes socioeconomic, legal and regulatory issues, it is the physical context that is most important from a design perspective. How wide are the sidewalks? Are they completely paved or is there a grassy strip? What do the roofs of neighboring houses look like? Are they pitched or flat, gabled or hipped? What are the primary exterior materials? What are the main colors? Do most of the surrounding houses have porches? Patios? Decks? How is open space handled? Questions like these can help define the physical context in which a new development is placed and can help the design team create housing that responds positively to this context.



## INTERNATIONAL HOMES

This development of 28 attached row houses was specifically designed to blend with the traditional architecture and streetscape of Chicago's Uptown neighborhood. The houses are grouped together with high roofs to fit the scale of the high-density neighborhood; gables and porches emphasize their individuality. This attention to design detail benefited the residents and enhanced the neighborhood. The community gained both stability and vitality by replacing dangerous vacant lots with quality homes.

### Enhancing neighborhoods

All affordable housing developments, no matter how small, have a responsibility beyond simply meeting the needs of their occupants. They also have a public responsibility to enhance the neighborhoods in which they are built. Good design is critical to this process and to moving developments beyond the goal of simply providing shelter to the goal of building communities.

### Building to last

Good design can help ensure that a development stands the test of time. By using materials, systems and finishes that are durable, easy to maintain, and energy efficient, a development team can ensure that its projects are cost effective and “built to last,” requiring minimal repair and upkeep. All four of these outcomes are tied to the physical aspects of a development and can be achieved only through intelligent, sensitive design. If successful, the result will be a development that works—one that is fully occupied, increasing in value, with residents who are proud of where they live, and neighbors who are pleased as well—and constitutes a lasting community asset that is, by definition, well designed.



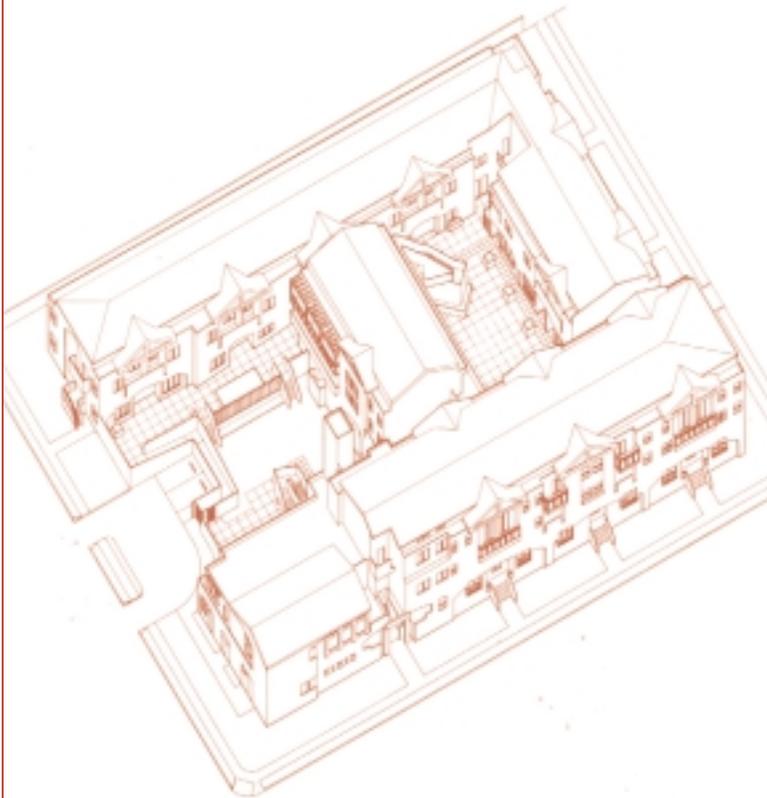
## WILLOWBROOK GREEN

The two-story buildings in this development surround a generous, well-landscaped courtyard containing a community building and a children's play area. Security was a prime consideration for the residents, and the development, through careful design and planning, provides an oasis of calm in a tough neighborhood in south central Los Angeles. The development works for its occupants. As resident Venitta Cunningham, a mother with three children, observed, "The arrangement allows us to keep an eye on each other. It feels very safe."



## VILLA ESPERANZA

At the beginning of the development process for this 33-unit project in Los Angeles, questionnaires were distributed to help pinpoint specific community needs and concerns. Later, schematic designs that responded to these concerns were presented to a neighborhood committee for review and input. The result was a successful, well-designed development that generated community support instead of opposition.



**MUTUAL HOUSING ASSOCIATION**

**WYONA STREET**

**BROOKLYN, N.Y.**

## What Good Design Costs

Of course, the first question any community developer will probably ask is: “Does good design cost more?” Fortunately, the short answer is: “No.” Key design principles—like access to light, air, and views; pleasant circulation patterns; spaces that are safe, easy to maintain, and that “work” for the activities that take place in them—can all be achieved on virtually any budget if the design process is managed effectively.

It is true that a well-designed development will cost more than the barest code-minimum housing—what one architect in affordable housing refers to as “barracks” projects—but compared to the majority of affordable housing built today, well-designed developments can be achieved for the same cost. For example, the Affordable Housing Design Advisor contains more than 80 case studies of well-designed projects that were delivered within the same severe cost constraints that confront any affordable housing developer. And only a handful of these are mixed-income developments; the majority serve low- or very low-income residents exclusively.

## A Common Misconception

Many community developers point to well-designed, market-rate housing—and how much it costs—as evidence that low-income developments simply can’t afford good design. While market-rate housing is clearly more expensive than affordable housing, it should not be assumed that better design is what drives up the costs. Costs are higher primarily because market-rate developments typically provide more and better amenities than much low-income housing: larger spaces, more expensive appliances, better finishes and fixtures. None of these amenities, however, is central to achieving design quality. In fact, even if you load up a badly designed development with all the amenities you can find, it will still be badly designed. In the same way, a well-designed development will remain well designed even with the most basic finishes and appliances.



### **Who's Responsible for Good Design**

So, it can be done. Good design is possible on an affordable housing budget, and there are ample LISC-sponsored projects across the country to prove it. But it takes a strong commitment by all the team members to pull it off. This commitment needs to start early in the process and be maintained to the very end: through value engineering, bidding/negotiation, and construction. Without such a commitment, it is too easy to slowly but surely eliminate key design features as the complex, back-and-forth of the development process unfolds. With such a commitment, participants will find a way to keep the most important design features in the project.

The single most important player—the one who is ultimately responsible for good design—is the community developer. Community development organizations put the whole package together. They

run the process and they control the money once a project is underway. Every one else on the team coordinates through, or works for, them.

The central role of the developer means that they must make—and maintain—the commitment to good design for the life of a project. They do not need to become designers themselves, but they must understand the design process—and appreciate the importance and value of good design—so that when the going gets tough over the course of a project, design quality remains an important priority.

In neighborhoods where LISC works, we have sponsored projects in which developers have made this commitment and created successful, well-designed affordable housing. It can be done and, with tools such as The Affordable Housing Design Advisor and initiatives like the Campaign for Excellence in



**CATHERINE STREET, ALBANY, N.Y.**

## RANDOLPH NEIGHBORHOOD, RICHMOND, VA



Affordable Housing Design (see sidebar at right and on page 6), community development organizations are better prepared than ever to achieve design excellence.

The result will be a legacy of successful, high-quality affordable housing—housing that works for residents and neighbors, that enhances neighborhoods and stabilizes communities, and that stands as a lasting credit to the community developers who created it.

**“For too long, good design has been overlooked as a tool for creating better communities. We at LISC are committed to changing this situation and ensuring that every development we support is a well-designed community asset.”**

**Michael Rubinger**  
LISC President and CEO

The **Campaign for Excellence in Affordable Housing**

**Design** is a new initiative of the organizations that originally created the **Affordable Housing Design Advisor**. The goal of the **Campaign** is to establish high quality design as the standard for all affordable housing developments by:

- Educating stakeholders involved in the production and delivery of affordable housing concerning the meaning, value, and process of good design.
- Developing research-based data and tools that will inform this education process and, in turn, help transform the community development marketplace into one which understands, values, and demands higher quality design.

The **Campaign** will use the **Affordable Housing Design**

**Advisor** as the repository for **Campaign** research results and as the platform for **Campaign** education and outreach activities.

**DEANE EVANS** is a registered architect and a Fellow of the American Institute of Architects, and is currently a Research Professor with the New Jersey Institute of Technology, where he directs the Center for Architecture and Building Science Research. He has a broad background in architectural research, construction technology, and building performance and has undertaken work in this area for, among others, the U.S. Department of Energy, the National Science Foundation, the National Institute of Justice, the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. While in private practice, Mr. Evans created the Affordable Housing Design Advisor, a unique, electronic tool that provides step-by-step guidance for affordable housing developers and community leaders on how to create better designed affordable housing.

**JODY BECK** is Ph.D. candidate at the University of Pennsylvania, who also holds a license to practice architecture in the state of Texas. Mr. Beck has worked in community development for over 10 years in various capacities, including developing a full socio-economic survey for San Jose de Buenavista on the island of Panay in the Philippines as a Peace Corps volunteer. Most recently, he helped develop the Rehab Advisor, which is a tool much akin to the Design Advisor that focuses on energy efficiency in affordable housing renovation. In addition, in partnership with Deane Evans, he has developed a series of short articles on key design issues.

CREDITS

Design: McKnight Kurland Baccelli, Chicago

Photography: From "Design for Living,  
Good Neighbors: Affordable Family Housing,"  
Tom Jones, William Pettus, AIA, Michael Pyatok, FAIA  
McGraw-Hill, 1995