

# Via Verde Housing

## OVERVIEW

Via Verde is an affordable housing development rooted in green sustainability located in the south bronx on 156<sup>th</sup> Street and Brook Avenue in New York City. It is the result of a winning competition entry, in the New Housing New York (NHNY) Legacy Competition sponsored by the New York City Department of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD), which aimed to rethink low to moderate income housing. The design team was comprised of Real Estate developer Johnathan Rose, non-for-profit Phipps Houses Group, Grimshaw Architects and Dattner Architects. Via Verde's elaborate landscape architecture is the work of Lee Weintraub Landscape Architects LLC.

The mixed-use development sits on a 1.5 acre site, reaches a total size of 294,000 Sq-ft to the tune of \$100 million dollars. It is comprised of 222 mixed income apartments (151 rentals and 71 co-ops), 9500 Sq-ft of live-work, retail and community facilities (a medical clinic and fitness center, 40,000 Sq-ft of green roofs, garden plots and a variety of open spaces and a number of green sustainable amenities. Household incomes will be capped at 130 percent of the median income for New York City, and one block of rental apartments is designated for households earning less than 40 percent of that figure.

## HISTORY

In 2004, the Bloomberg administration supplied the large tracts of city owned land at Brook Avenue and East 156th Street in the South Bronx to be the prize of a competition hosted by [AIA New York](#) (6) in hopes of inspiring imaginative design for working-class housing (4). Thirty-two teams of architects and building designers competed (2), attracting the likes of well known architectural firms, such as: Grimshaw Architects, Behnisch Architekten, Cook + Fox, Rogers Marvel, Kiss + Cathcart (1). The jury for the competition included not only architects but a professor of environmental psychology and anthropology as well (4). The winning design was announced on January 17, 2007 (1). The city then turned over the site to the development team for \$1 and groundbreaking was set for mid-2008. Via Verde, the 300,000 square foot building, which sites on a remediated [brownfield](#) site is a component of Mayor Bloomberg's New Housing Marketplace Plan to build and preserve 165,000 units of affordable housing over 10 years and the result of the city's first juried design competition for affordable and sustainable housing (1). Of the Via Verde residence, Mayor Bloomberg has said, they "comprise the backbone of the city" (2).

## THE ARCHITECTS

"Johnathan Rose Companies is a green real estate, policy, planning, development, civic development and investment firm." Founded in 1989, the company works on a range of scales from individual buildings to regional projects. (8)

“Phipps Houses is one of the nation's oldest and largest not-for-profit developers, owners, and managers of affordable housing.” Founded in 1905, it is a real estate organization involved in the construction of new housing, rehabilitation of existing apartment buildings, residential and some commercial property management, as well as community building. They provide housing for low-income and moderate-income families and are required by law to rent apartments to income-eligible families through a government lottery system. (9)

Grimshaw Architects was founded in 1980 and is now an international firm with offices in New York, London, Melbourne and Sydney. Their work ranges from buildings to master plans and industrial design.

Dattner Architects is a multi-faceted firm founded in 1964 based out of New York City. “The practice includes master planning and building for educational and cultural institutions, public agencies, non-for profits groups and corporate clients, historic preservation, adaptive reuse, sustainable architecture and interior design.” (10)

Lee Weintruab Landscape Architecture LLC, is a small New York based firm with many years of experience and a highly respected track record. Mr. Weintruab is a professor of landscape Architecture at the CUNY Spitzer School of Architecture.

## **Site and context**

The site, which had been an empty 60,000-square-foot lot at Brook Avenue and East 156th Street(4), had been condemned in an urban renewal program of 1972. The 1.4-acre abandoned brownfield sat “Northeast of the [neighborhoods] hub, the third-largest shopping district in the [Bronx](#)” (4). As Via Verde came to be, what developed was more than an acre of open space for the community along with more than 200 apartments (3).

## **Form and Use**

The complex is comprised of three distinct building types, townhouses, an apartment block and the tower (5). The neighborhood wanted the buildings to form a visual bridge between a public housing tower to the north and a schoolyard to the south. So the Via Verde design gradually increases in height from two-story townhouses to an 18-story high-rise (3). The architects wanted to wrap the building with a garden, “beginning with a contemplative space and moving “from very private to increasing levels of communality” (4).

## **Materials and Methods of Construction**

Unlike the red brick housing developments of old, Via Verde is made of steel and reinforced concrete, and clad in silvery grey and orange aluminum panels, and wood panels as well.

## Sustainable Design

Via Verde is designed to achieve LEED Gold certification from the U.S. Green Building Council (USGBC) (8). Inspired by nature within the city, the building's green agenda drives its form and identity. In order to optimize sustainability, as well as keep operating costs low, the architects came up with a building design that maximizes daylight and natural breezes (6). Every apartment is given two facades, allowing for cross-ventilation and plenty of light (4). To encourage conservation, residents are given control of their own energy consumption, with low-flow, water-conserving plumbing fixtures. The building features high efficiency mechanical systems, such as motion sensors in stairways and corridors conserve electricity (8). Strategically placed solar panels (photovoltaics) provide 15 to 20 percent of the energy needed to run the building's elevators, water pumps, and air conditioning in common areas (6). Geothermal ground loops heat water in winter and cool it in summer. A storm water reclamation system recycles water for irrigation feeding numerous outdoor green spaces. Garden plots are also provided for residence to grow produce and the building even boasts a Christmas tree farm (4). Extra rooms are provided for recycling and bicycle storage (4). According to Via Verde's website, in the process of construction over 20% of the materials used were recycled and over 20% of building materials were manufactured locally.

## SIGNIFICANCE

Vie Verde is significant, as it was New York City's first juried competition aimed at generating innovative design for public housing. But also because the architects and designers made concerted efforts to work with the wants and needs of the existing neighborhood. "Getting community feedback is extraordinarily valuable," said Adam Weinstein, president of nonprofit Phipps Houses. Everyone involved in the project worked "with the hope that this could be really a model," said Shaun Donovan, commissioner of the Department of Housing Preservation and Development. (4) He went on to say, "given the responses we got, I think there's a real opportunity for this to be a project that changes the future of housing in this country." (4)

## PHOTOS



## **Bibliography**

1)

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