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### BAY AREA'S BEST DESIGN ISN'T JUST FOR THE RICH

John King, Chronicle Urban Design Writer  
Saturday, June 23, 2007

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When the San Francisco chapter of the American Institute of Architects handed out design awards this spring, the winners included such trophies as a private home above Golden Gate Park.

But not all the winners were so rarefied. Three architecture prizes went to housing complexes built by nonprofit developers, while an urban design commendation celebrated the rebirth of a public housing project.

This isn't a fluke, or political correctness applied to subsidized housing. It reflects a surprising aspect of today's urban landscape: Many of the most progressive buildings -- both in appearance and function -- are designed expressly for low- and moderate-income residents.

"Nonprofit developers often are more open to freedom and creativity in design," said architect Anne Phillips, who received an AIA award for Margaret Breland Homes in Berkeley, a brightly colored collection of 25 apartments for low-income seniors. "They aren't thinking about some imaginary buyer they're catering to. They're just out to provide good places to live."

The presence of high-quality affordable housing isn't new. Nor is it confined to the Bay Area. What's different now is that subsidized housing projects are being added to more cities, in more visible locations.

There's funding available, such as the \$850 million earmarked for infill development as part of the Prop. 1C housing bond approved in November by voters. There's also political impetus: The need for affordable housing is so pervasive that communities are more open to the idea than in the past.

In the suburbs, many projects stress neotraditional looks that aim to placate critics who don't want anything that seems out of place. But in urban districts with a mix of architectural styles, the result can be an adventurous change of pace.

Margaret Breland Homes, the senior housing designed by Anne Phillips Architecture for Jubilee Restoration and Resources for Community Development, illustrates this.

Breland Homes is bigger than anything around it, a long four-story structure inserted into the middle of a block on San Pablo Avenue between a car repair shop and single-family homes. But instead of being a single brick-shaped slab, Phillips' design pulls apart the structure on the upper floors to allow in air and light.

The third and fourth floors show the most dramatic gap. There's a 35-foot-wide space separating their east and west sections, allowing room for a courtyard in between. It feels like a town square, with the laundry room opening off it while fourth-floor residents can look down from an open-air bridge that leads to each unit's front door.



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John King

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