



PDF Complete
Your complimentary use period has ended.
Thank you for using PDF Complete.

[Click Here to upgrade to Unlimited Pages and Expanded Features](#)



NEWS

[send to printer](#)

January 2- 8, 2003

Also this issue:

CITYSPACE

[Cracking The Nut](#)
-Daniel Brook

Go Low



Low-Rise and Shine: PHA wants to create a vital North Central Philadelphia with housing developments like this one at 11th and Brown streets. Photo By: Michael T. Regan

The high expectations for low-rise public housing.

by [Daniel Brook](#)

It looks like a new development off a highway in New Jersey, with row upon row of identical modern homes springing up on huge swaths of land and a new shopping center under construction nearby. But this isn't Jersey. It's North Philadelphia, just east of Broad and south of Girard -- where a spate of building activity has been spurred by the Philadelphia Housing Authority's (PHA) redevelopment of a number of failed housing projects on land just a stone's throw from Center City.

What had been a high-rise housing project has been leveled, to be replaced by townhouses. The aim is to create public housing that tenants appreciate and that discourages crime. In part this is accomplished by including home-ownership units in the mix. Forty of the 124 homes at the Cambridge Plaza project will be for sale at affordable prices. Each home in the development will have a modest yard: a 'defensible area,' in PHA's vaguely military bureaucrat-ese.

The replacement of high-rise rental projects with low-rise mixed rental and home-ownership developments has been taking place all over the city since the mid-1990s. PHA has leveled 16 towers, with replacement projects around the city now in various stages of completion, at a projected total cost of over \$1 billion. The Mill Creek high-rises in West Philadelphia were leveled just a few months ago, while the Southwark towers were taken down years ago and have long since been replaced by townhomes.

PHA spokesman Kirk Dorn explains the change of philosophy: 'We found that the high-rise towers were incubators for crime, drug abuse and antisocial behavior. It made no sense to warehouse people in those conditions, [so] the decision was made to transform our properties.'

During the Clinton administration, Housing and Urban Development money flowed into Philadelphia. While the Bush administration 'cut [funding] pretty dramatically,' according to Dorn, a lot of the real estate deals financing the current work were made in the 1990s, allowing construction to continue in leaner times.

'We're trying to create a secure area from City Hall up to Girard,' Dorn says. PHA is trying to create a North Central Philadelphia where, according to Dorn, you would feel comfortable 'riding your bike to work.'

Just a few years ago, Dorn admits, this would have seemed a utopian dream. 'You couldn't do that when the high-rises were up here,' he says, gesturing toward a block of fenced-in urban prairie with a PHA sign announcing it as the site of the 'Cambridge Plaza Redevelopment.' The Cambridge towers were taken down in July 2001 and the first units will become available next fall.

In the past, PHA's crime-ridden developments killed the private housing market in the areas surrounding them. Blighted buildings still surround the blocks of South 13th Street between Bainbridge and Catharine, where the Martin Luther King towers once stood and low-rises are now being constructed. But Dorn says the redevelopments are re-igniting private housing markets in areas near PHA projects. He points to the shopping center being built on Girard as an amenity that



Your complimentary
use period has ended.
Thank you for using
PDF Complete.

[Click Here to upgrade to
Unlimited Pages and Expanded Features](#)

nearby. But there is also a private tennis center being built at 10th and
may be catering to the middle-class Yorktown enclave north of Girard
Developers were terrified of crime, they never would have opened up on
ning to serve.

Even if the crime rate is down, the real nurdie is changing outsiders' perceptions of the crime rate. And with quaint townhomes replacing ominous towers, Dorn says, perceptions are changing. Dorn proudly drops the anecdote that when the TV show *Hack* was recently looking to shoot on a 'nice Philadelphia block,' they chose a redeveloped PHA project.

But Dorn admits one of the pitfalls of replacing towers with townhouses is that the total number of tenants has to be reduced -- usually by about half. 'We have the same amount of [land] but we're not going up as high,' Dorn says. Displaced tenants are usually housed in Section 8 units, privately owned housing for which the government provides a partial-rent subsidy. 'Federal policy, especially under the Bush administration, is to allow the private sector to share in the process of supplying public housing,' Dorn says.

Last fall, the influx of Section 8 tenants into Northeast Philadelphia became a political hot potato in a congressional race between Rep. Joe Hoeffel and Republican challenger Melissa Brown, whose press secretary called the tenants 'felons, drug dealers and prostitutes.' Pejorative generalizations aside, Dorn says PHA is trying to do a better job of screening tenants before moving them into Section 8 housing. Overall, he says, 'The people who remain [in PHA projects] have a much better chance of having normal lives.'

(brook@citypaper.net)



-- Respond to this article in our Forums -- [click](#) to jump there