

# NEW YORK

## Hunters Point South Should Be the New Gold Standard for Affordable Housing

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Right about now, the world's best architects should be elbowing each other out of the way in a rush to New York. The city is primed for another golden age, not just of designer skyscrapers and expanding museums, but of rental buildings where ordinary New Yorkers can live without pawning a kidney. We have a cause, a need, political energy, and a pot of money. What's missing is any sense that the residential towers and mid-rise blocks that will be popping up in the coming years need to be any good.

As Mayor de Blasio's team fans out to sweet-talk community boards, cajole councilmembers, and admonish developers into embracing his affordable-housing plan, the talk is all about numbers: units (a.k.a. "apartments") and costs, incomes and rents. The administration nods to design in its stirringly titled manifesto "Zoning for Quality and Affordability," which would revive the stoop and dole out a few extra floors to senior centers. But the housing crisis gives de Blasio a chance to do more than tweak: He could outline the next great iteration of New York and make compassion concrete.

Once again, an alliance of officials, do-gooders, and profiteers is reshaping the city by providing homes that non-rich New Yorkers can pay for: 80,000 new apartments in a decade, according to the de Blasio administration's ambitions, plus another 120,000 rent-regulated apartments snatched from the market's maw. And yet the system that the mayor is kicking into gear was built to defeat excellence. Many builders and officials believe that architecture is one amenity too many for a below-market rental building — that good design is a sentimental luxury.

And so global architects converge on the sites around the High Line, where prices have reached such tulip-fever

excess that no lily can seem too gilded. When the megadeveloper Related opened a sales office for Zaha Hadid's 520 West 28th, an executive boasted that the steel contrails whipping around the aerodynamic exterior cost "multiples" of an ordinary façade. What would it take to redirect that kind of passion to real-people rentals? Hadid wouldn't know how to scrimp if she were stranded on Mars, but many of her world-class colleagues do. Workers are finishing up Bjarke Ingels's startlingly pyramidal VIA 57 West, which contains 142 (out of 709) units earmarked for low-income renters. More, please!

Affordable housing is rough on architecture. Specialists in penny-pinching delete details and cheapen materials, reducing buildings to kits of off-the-shelf components. Even firms like Dattner — experts in packing tight envelopes, grinding through bureaucracy, and squeezing stingy budgets — struggle to produce better-than-basic buildings. Dattner's design (with Bernheimer Architecture) for Brooklyn Cultural District: Apartments, now under construction on Lafayette Avenue, does sneak a terra-cotta rain screen past the austerity enforcers, but only because just 40 percent of the apartments will have regulated rents.

Still, good architecture can survive budgetary rigors — at Hunters Point South, for instance, where a pair of hulking towers designed by SHoP and Ismael Levya Architects expresses de Blasio's urgency even though it's a holdover from the era of the allegedly Nero-like Michael Bloomberg. A low-cost neighborhood on the southern end of Long Island City has been mumbled about for more than a decade, and the idea came wrapped in glamour. Hadid even submitted a sumptuous competition entry for the Olympic Village that Bloomberg hoped to place there. Reality and the IOC had other plans.

Co-developed by Related (the custodian of Hadid's bauble), Monadnock, and the nonprofit Phipps Houses, the new towers have bright, jaunty façades, with orange trim, steel tridents, and a syncopated rhythm of windows in glass of various hues. Here, the living is good and the trade-offs are few. Room sizes might be a tad on the intimate side and the refrigerators sub-Sub-Zero, but gardeners from GrowNYC cultivate tomatoes on the terrace, an apiary churns out honey so local it can be delivered by elevator, kids can tumble out of bed and into their spanking-new school in under a minute, and the midtown skyline glimmers at arm's reach. Dogs have it good, too. A fine new park recently sprouted across the street, and the building contains a canine lounge, with a porthole to a playroom where human young tumble for the dogs' entertainment.



SHoP's new towers are not world-beating architecture, but they're more than good enough to plug into an evolving network of ferries, parks, schools, shops, all of which foster more investment. If the market continues rocketing toward the edge of the atmosphere, the buildings will come to seem more and more modest, a bulwark of sanity in a city gone nuts. They'll also be hard to reproduce. Built on a rare parcel of city-donated land when the recession reined in construction costs, the towers cost about \$300 million, and the price would jump another \$75 million if they were being started today. This is subsidized housing for the other one percent — that is, the 925 out of 93,000 applicants who won the randomized lottery — and we need a lot more of it.

We've dealt with this problem before, many times. "Affordable New York," an exhibition at the Museum of the City of New York curated by Thomas Mellins, escorts visitors through the history of the war on squalor. What jumps out is how powerfully those battles have shaped the city, from rules that brightened tenements and created fire escapes, to immense groves of X-shaped towers, to the slow, heroic reclamation of the South Bronx. Each of those crusades had its failures. Among the artifacts is a decal of the kind that the city pasted on boarded-up windows in the '80s to make bombed-out properties look lived-in: A picture of a potted geranium sits on a fake sill, while two-dimensional shutters open onto nothing at all. Idealists who set out to sweep away crumbling tenements and put up clean-lined havens of hygiene instead often wound up warehousing the poor in vast vertical slums. Programs that kept prices low for decades have been expiring, contributing to the crisis they were meant to solve. One lesson of this erratic history is that bad decisions endure at least as long as good ones. Another is that the cost of building too little is high, but so is the cost of building badly.



From that historical survey, you can scoot downtown and into the future at the Center for Architecture's show "Designing Affordability," where an international gathering of architects proposes an elaborate menu of ideas: pre-fabricated modules, gerbil-scaled apartments, zero-energy systems, dorm-style shares, and so on. Some solutions are downright perverse, such as modular micro-units, the stackable solitary-confinement cells being marketed as a solution to the ebbing of the nuclear family. Others tantalize with their inventiveness, including one by the L.A.-based Patrick Tighe. At Courtyard at La Brea, he wrapped ornate metal screens around soothing gardens and a gorgeous, energy-efficient haven for the formerly homeless. It's the sort of project that makes you wonder: Why isn't this guy commuting to New York?

The two shows together illuminate the paradox that has run through the city's history: Affordable housing is an act of resistance to the market's worst depredations, yet it's a luxury only a wealthy city can afford. We have learned to

tap the power of capitalism in expensive neighborhoods with a socialist sleight of hand: The banker paying a fortune for the penthouse grudgingly subsidizes the teacher downstairs. We have also learned to channel low-income housing into areas where land is cheapest, which is why the city proposes to rezone East New York. Both tactics are necessary evils: The first sprinkles a token number of poor people among the rich, the second segregates the poor, and the two together risk polarizing the city into Xanadus and slums.

Hunters Point South offers a better model. Reproducing it would mean scrounging more land (in between NYCHA towers, at Sunnyside Yards, and on the South Bronx waterfront, for starters), investing in infrastructure, holding competitions, and demanding real design. The result would be measured not only in units but in neighborhoods designed for mixture — places where architects are eager to work and New Yorkers of all income levels would cheerfully kill to live.