Pyatok and his Bay Area firm combine true concern with street-smart expertise to further the cause of nonprofit, low-income housing. by Sally Woodbridge

Since 1985 Michael Pyatok has been building a practice on designing housing for those least able to afford it. This has been an uphill course, since the Federal government had by then all but stopped funding new housing for the poor. Yet Pyatok says that his experience has deepened his conviction that housing for low-income households can be rewarding for architects.

When asked to name some of the rewards of what many architects view as a frustrating and unremunerative practice, Pyatok is quick to agree that making money is not one of them. In fact, he has consistently taught half-time to balance his income. Although his firm has prospered he continues to use part of his income to pay his staff for the extra hours required to design housing for limited budgets. There is also the reward of “beating the odds” stacked against designing and building not-for-profit housing that offers visual appeal and user satisfaction.

Since the mid-1980s part of the void left by the lapse of Federal housing programs has gradually been filled by nonprofit organizations. The NPs have been honing their skills in fundraising and management so that, particularly in the last ten years, they have been creating opportunities for architects to design low-income housing of noteworthy design. Yet in his frequent speaking engagements around the country, Pyatok has discovered that many major cities have virtually no nonprofit sector to cope with inadequate housing for the poor.

The San Francisco Bay area, the location of most of Pyatok’s projects, has been fertile ground for the development of a strong nonprofit community for several reasons. Foremost among them is the area’s compact geography. Interested professionals and residents of the contiguous cities around the bay have not found it so difficult to build coalitions here as it is, say, in Southern California, where cities sprawl across great distances. Another factor Pyatok credits for the strength of the nonprofit sector is the existence of the UC Berkeley city and regional planning department, which has trained planners who have either joined community development agencies or have served as consultants or staff to nonprofits. (continued on next page)

Willow Court,
Menlo Park, California

The four projects presented here were built in the past two years in relatively stable areas with populations who had to be convinced that the projects would not bring a decline in property values and quality of life. The oldest, Willow Court, completed in the spring of 1992, is Pyatok's second project for the Mid-Peninsula Coalition for Housing, a 24-year-old nonprofit organization. The six four-bedroom units, designed for large, very low-income families, were grouped to give the appearance of two large houses.

Pyatok has found that increasing the scale of buildings gives them more dignity, particularly in old neighborhoods that often have large homes. Although the detailing of the Willow Court buildings is simple, it expresses a kinship with the Craftsman bungalows typical of the region. The simplified stylistic features—wooden trellises to dress up entrances, shaped brackets, barge boards, and picket fences, evoke a general idea of home without aping any one style.
Over the nine years of his practice Pyatok has developed strategies to ease the often arduous approval process for low-income projects. The first step his design team takes is a series of neighborhood workshops that expose the residents to the design process. Participants are given several site-planning kits, with parking – a difficult challenge they could not be expected to solve – already in place. Since the location of parking indicates ways of relating the buildings, residents may use these indications to develop their own ideas about buildings and open spaces.

A second workshop presents the first workshop’s schemes, drawn up and analyzed by the architects so that participants may make decisions about the final solution. Using similar modeling methods, succeeding workshops focus on the design of the units. Because the architects know from experience the costs typically associated with room sizes and other dimensions, they are given in sample plans that the participants use in developing their schemes. Following a review of the plans drawn up and analyzed for the follow-up workshop, firm decisions are made. The results of the workshops are consolidated for presentation to city planning departments.

Pyatok has found that the schemes developed in the workshops rarely conform to official guidelines and usually require variances. Planners without knowledge of the specific neighborhoods have to be convinced that the workshop process has been sound. Since Pyatok is well known in Oakland, he can use the success of previous projects to argue for deviations from standards.

**Familiarity Fights NIMBYism**

Despite the arduousness of the participatory planning process, Pyatok would prefer to have more rather than less of it. The educational effects, he believes, are crucial to giving the residents of the project a positive experience. Notwithstanding the prevalence of NIMBYism in all neighborhoods, Pyatok has found that residents in low-income neighborhoods are prone to boost new projects they have participated in because they view them as raising their own quality of life. Successful projects often produce a wave of owner improvements in other neighborhood buildings.

Another strategy that Pyatok believes is helpful in combating NIMBYism is the use of conservative imagery in designing
Marcus Garvey Commons
Oakland, California

Marcus Garvey Commons, completed in fall 1992, was sponsored by the East Bay Asian Local Development Corporation, which serves primarily Asians in Oakland's Chinatown, and Jubilee West, which serves the African-American community in West Oakland. The project is six blocks from the site where the Cypress freeway collapsed in the 1989 earthquake; it is visible from the elevated BART tracks carrying passengers across the bay. Two- and three-story townhouses contain the 18 family units; disabled residents are housed in four single units on grade.

A community center that faces the cross street at one end of the property serves the surrounding neighborhood; behind it are commons and a play area used by the residents. As at Willow Court, each unit has a garden area by the front door that opens into a living room. The large kitchen with eating space faces a rear patio, that is convenient to the parking area.

The grouping of the units here creates the effect of rowhouses to strengthen the block front, once a row of 19th-Century cottages that had gradually vanished because of fires and neglect. Projecting bays and alternating warm and cool pastel colors break up the building mass. Stairs to upper units, a common feature of 19th-Century houses in the neighborhood, also enliven the street frontage.
new projects. Whereas in upper-income areas an unconventional use of materials and forms may be acceptable – even trend setting – it tends to stigmatize projects in low-income neighborhoods. Pyatok believes that the ideal of social housing is better served by architecture with a familiar appearance that puts a reassuring face on the more substantive societal change being introduced into the community. He has also observed that the most satisfactory building designs are those that accept the necessity for continuous management and modifications of the initial buildings over their lifetime.

Designing for the lifestyles of the poor requires every bit as much of the architect’s attention as designing for the rich. Pyatok points out that the small room sizes and limited options for such things as finishes and fixtures need not simplify or standardize plans. Indeed every linear foot of wall counts, and every door swing consumes valuable space. At least 50 percent of design time in Pyatok’s office goes into fitting the unit plans to occupants’ needs. Items that might be taken for granted with bigger budgets – an additional half-bath, for example – become luxuries subject to trade-offs.

The Amenity of Art

Art, Pyatok believes, is more of a necessity than a luxury and is well worth the extra effort needed to find funds for it outside the project budget. He has run the gamut from applying for NEA grants, often successfully, to commissioning works from artists, to working in his own back yard with members of his staff to craft birdhouses and wood sculptures.

Pyatok’s commitment was, in a way, born into him. Having grown up with his mother and brother in a one-room apartment in Brooklyn’s industrial area – across from a factory that ran three shifts a day – he understands poor people’s needs. He was fortunate in winning scholarships, first to a Jesuit school and later to Pratt and to Harvard, where he earned an M.Arch. When his education ended in 1967, the troubled times made him uncomfortable with the mainstream practice of architecture. His desire to confront problems afflicting the poor and disenfranchised led him to work with many low-income communities in the U.S. In the mid-1970s he went to Mexico City to run a program for Mexican and American graduate students that developed participatory design and planning methods for self-help communities. (continued on next page)
Tower Apartments
Rohnert Park, California

 Organizations that build rental housing for low-income people in California face both high land costs and a need for low unit costs to qualify for Federal and state financial assistance. In projects such as Tower Apartments, the resulting high densities usually set off neighborhood opposition, and architects must devise strategies to mitigate the effects of these densities. Various approaches to this challenge include grouping units, as discussed above, and creating a village image, which often appeals both to residents and to neighbors.

 For these apartments, completed in 1993 in a city north of San Francisco, Pyatok arranged the 50 family units around two courtyards to reduce the apparent scale. Along the main street in front of the property, three- and four-bedroom townhouses are two stories high to conform better to the density of the surrounding community. The buildings around the courtyards are three levels high, with the two-story units located above two-bedroom flats and parking. Each dwelling has its own front and back patio or porch.

 The community center, laundry, office, and mail room are located in one central building convenient to both courtyards. Although at 25 dwelling units per acre the project's density is twice that of its surroundings, the intimate character of the courtyards dispels the impression that people have been crowded together against their will. At the dedication, a county supervisor confirmed the design's success by stating that the project had converted him from opposing high-density housing to advocating it.

 The search for ways to add visual interest to low-budget buildings has led Pyatok to create a vocabulary of elements—bracketed bays, trellises, and stairways to upper levels—that are easily integrated with projects of varying sizes. Contrasting colors and surface materials also contribute to an impression of quality. Rarely an issue in for-profit housing, these aspects of design loom large in the budgets of the firm's projects. For example, Pyatok often has to argue long and hard for using board siding that has a shadow line.
In 1977 Pyatok moved to California, settling in Oakland. He spent the next seven years working for other architects; as a housing activist he helped to found a nonprofit, Oakland Community Housing, Inc. In 1983 he applied for and won a Loeb Fellowship, which took him to Harvard to attend the Kennedy School of Public Policy and the Business School. There he deepened his theoretical knowledge of the housing field and returned to Oakland to establish his own office. Since then he has completed over 50 projects and has 11 more in design and construction phases.

Nonprofit organizations have been his valued clients, both because their goals are to create housing as a long-term investment and because they have come to recognize that good design is an important means of winning acceptance for their projects. Indeed Pyatok has found that because his clients need exemplary projects to promote their next ventures, they are likely to exceed design guidelines in order to build something the neighborhood will be proud of. Since an average of 600 applications are received for every 30 units he builds, the selected residents are generally model tenants.

In his zeal to advance the cause of affordable housing, Pyatok has mounted a virtual crusade to reach beyond the nonprofit world to that of for-profit developers and their investors. The NEA has granted funds to enable him and Tom Jones, architect in charge of design for one of San Francisco’s most active nonprofits, Asian Neighborhood Design, to tour U.S. cities and spread the word. In these fallow times Federal tax credits for low-income housing make it easier to get the attention of private-market developers. Pyatok, Jones, and former Pyatok employee Willie Pettus are also collaborating on a book of case studies of affordable housing. Since 1990 Pyatok has been commuting to Seattle to teach at the University of Washington’s Department of Architecture.

**A Civic Vision**

As for the future, Pyatok is optimistic that housing for the poor can be designed to promote their dignity and comfort; that high-density housing can be interwoven with both restful and active community spaces, all of this embedded in the public domain of streets, parks, and plazas. However, this future depends on change in other aspects of society. As a seasoned activist, Pyatok believes that architects interested in the future of affordable housing have to take time from their drawing boards to work with planners and policy makers to change the laws that segregate work places from housing and to create the jobs that bring social stability.
YWCA Family Village
Redmond, Washington

Another project completed in 1993, the YWCA Family Village was designed in association with Stickney Murphy architects of Seattle. Although the location in this booming area known as Seattle’s Eastside is not one that suggests a population in need, the area is experiencing increasing homelessness and lacks affordable housing. After surveying the needs of the greater Seattle area, the Y’s board determined that this site at an intersection, with a school and a church occupying two other corners, would give high visibility to a model project. Since the 20 apartments, which house mostly women and their children, are in one building, the term “village” is a misnomer. But it does suggest the kind of interdependency the facility supports.

This is transitional housing for people who, for various reasons, find themselves temporarily homeless. Each apartment is occupied for from three to twelve months while the heads of the households look for new employment and more permanent housing. The building has a child-care program for up to 60 children and a variety of counseling services for the parents.

Although the structure has the familiar look of the country inns and lodges found in the Northwest region, its street elevations hold the corner site and confirm the town’s grid pattern. The variation of materials to create a base and an attic story breaks down the building’s scale.

The ground floor plan, with its reception desk and conference room, echoes the homeliness of the lodge and was designed to alleviate the stressful effects of the crises facing these families. Because children are such a presence in the building, their needs were addressed in such features as 10-foot-wide corridors for indoor play, with large windows facing south. These corridors open to back porches from which stairs lead down to the play yard. Adjacent apartments have “swing rooms” between them that permit the conversion of two apartments with two bedrooms each into a three-bedroom and a one-bedroom unit. One large room per unit for living, dining, and cooking reflects the way the families live, facilitates handicapped access, and provides a more efficient overall space plan.