

A new bell rings for affordable housing



The Lural Lee Blevins Veterans Center, an affordable housing development in Philadelphia. Photo credit: Cheryl Hess.

By Kathleen M. O'Donnell

When students walked out the doors of North Philadelphia's Spring Garden School for the last time, many of them had no idea that their beloved school would lay vacant for almost 30 years. They also had no idea that in 2017, those doors would reopen for a new group of individuals at the Lural Lee Blevins Veterans Center, an affordable housing development.

The school's impressive transformation served as the subject of this year's [AIA Film Challenge](#) Grand Prize-winning film, *Past/Presence: Saving the Spring Garden School*. The work of filmmaker Cheryl Hess, the film depicts what can happen when a city, non-profit organizations, and architects band together to address a serious need. "There's so much gentrification in Philly right now and a lot of it is happening without thought," says Hess. About the city's biggest developers, she says, "they're often building and not thinking about the fabric of the city."

Like many other American cities, Philadelphia is suffering from a lack of affordable housing. "I would definitely categorize it as a crisis," says Erika Scharr, an architect and director of affordable housing at architecture firm [Kramer + Marks](#). "There's so much development geared toward market rate and the cost of living is going up. There is a higher need, especially, when you talk about veterans and elderly."

Kramer + Marks has been designing affordable housing for over 20 years, and the Blevins Center marks their fifth effort in Philadelphia. In partnership with nonprofit [HELP USA](#) and the Philadelphia Housing Authority, they developed and reimagined the 90-year-old property, which is now home to dozens of veterans and individuals with low income. "Especially for affordable housing, we do a lot of renovation and preservation. It's one of the few we've done that's been an abandoned building," says Kramer + Marks architectural designer Andrew Cook.

A completely abandoned building presented more challenges than the typical historic property renovation. "The building was in very bad condition—one of the worst I've seen. It was difficult to examine properly because it was so dirty," says Jonathan Lindstrom, AIA, the lead project manager. Collaborators rose to the challenge, though, and rehabilitated the school not only for apartments, but also as a hub for support services and recreation.

School buildings are gaining attention as appropriate structures for affordable housing, primarily because classrooms can be easily converted to equal size units. "The school was already segmented, so it was a good choice," says Cook. Schools built in the early 20th century like the Spring Garden School also have high ceilings and large windows—two elements that increase comfort and wellness amongst residents.

[Historic structures](#) like Spring Garden School are often already well-loved by their communities—a sense of nostalgia comes from the history within their walls. "People are really excited about this being an adaptive reuse project," according to Hess. In the film we meet Karen Hunter, a veteran and current resident of the Blevins Center who Hess recalls was "psyched" that there were details left in the design to honor the building's past such as sliding doors and built-in shelving for school supplies. Giving a tour of her new home in the film, Hunter says, "I hope they do more projects like this."

Fortunately, that's what Kramer + Marks hopes to do. They see school buildings as perhaps the next frontier in affordable housing, especially in Philadelphia where many structures stand ready and waiting for their own revitalizations. The firm plans to continue working with HELP USA on projects like the Blevins Center across the city.

It will take many hands to overcome Philadelphia's housing crisis and the city has measures in place to ensure residents are involved in the process. According to the Kramer + Marks team, community participation is a requirement to receive zoning approval for housing developments. HELP USA led that charge with the Blevins Center, engaging members of the neighborhood in discussions about the project.

When future residents and neighbors have a voice in a project's development, they can rally behind it, resulting in a structure that stands to be appreciated for years to come. That spirit of collaboration is evident in the film. And for Lindstrom, it was one of the best parts of the whole process. "It's always inspiring to see when a community is engaged," he says. "You realize how important design can be."

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