



Putting art to work

By LISA GRAY Copyright 2010 Houston Chronicle

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Architect Ernesto Maldonado, walks in front Brays Crossing, a New Hope Housing projects for low-income residents.

For months, commuters on the Gulf Freeway have been wondering about the seven buildings near the Griggs exit.

Until a couple of years ago, they were the old, grim-looking Houtex Inn, “a hot-sheet motel,” according to Richard Celli, director of Houston's Department of Housing and Community Development. Cops tended to arrive with their guns drawn.

A couple of years later, after a down-to-the-studs renovation, the difference shows even from the busy interstate. Though only partially finished, the complex already manages to look both modern and perky. It sports eye-popping colors — bright blue, green and mango — and in front of two buildings, 500-foot-long metal art walls resemble lacy works of , those paper cut-outs that flutter at taquerias and Day of the

Dead parties.

What the heck is that place? drivers wonder. Upscale condos? Part of Houston Community College? An art school?

That response pleases Joy Horak-Brown, the executive director of New Hope Housing. Brays Crossing is New Hope's latest “single-room occupancy,” or SRO, development. The 149 college-dorm-like rooms will be rented to people with very low incomes — no more than \$22,350 a year, and on average, around \$13,000 a year. They're people scraping by on pensions, or disability payments or minimum wage; they're students, widows, veterans, former addicts, women escaping bad relationships. Some are escaping homelessness.

The rooms are small (225 to 465 square feet), but each has its own window, built-in single bed and a little kitchen with a full-size refrigerator and microwave. The low monthly rent (\$405 to \$440) includes all bills, even cable TV. But it also includes a level of design and maintenance that would be enviable at an upscale condo complex.

“If it looks like low-income housing,” says Horak-Brown, “then we failed.”

A tricky rehab

If architecture is about solving problems, rehabbing the Houtex was a dream project: The awkward buildings posed lots of problems.



New Hope Housing, a nonprofit, prefers to build its projects from scratch, but the city of Houston and some rehab-specific tax credits enticed the group to tackle the Houtex. Celli, in the housing department, saw the project as a double play: Getting rid of the Houtex would remove a “crime haven,” and Brays Crossing would provide high-quality housing for a desperately underserved group. After touring another New Hope SRO, the superneighborhood group approved.

Still, rehabbing the Houtex was tricky. Ernesto Maldonado, of the architecture firm Glassman Shoemaker Maldonado, reels off some of the project's problems.

There was the buildings' size and predetermined structure, which meant that he couldn't devote as much space as he'd like to the project's important public areas (the 24-hour reception desk, the TV room, the library, the kitchen, storage and such).

There was the fact that the pier-and-beam buildings perched 3 feet off the ground, with stairs leading up to the first-floor apartments — a nonstarter for New Hope, which expects many of its residents to be disabled. To get around that, he designed a ramp-and-deck system that connects all the first floor, so a wheelchair can roll easily. Once you've gone up the ramp, you hardly notice that you're actually 3 feet off the ground. It's startling to realize that the trees growing through cut-outs in the deck aren't actually 7 feet, but 10 feet. You just don't see the 3 feet of their trunks that's below the deck.

But mainly, there was freeway noise. Inside the old hotel, with doors and windows shut, the roar of traffic registered 68 decibels, so loud that Maldonado had to shout for builders to hear him.

To meet federal requirements, he had to reduce that sound to a 45-decibel hum.

Insulation and improved doors and windows alone wouldn't do the trick. He needed sound barriers between the four front apartment buildings and the freeway — walls that would deflect the roar. But solid walls, or even ones made of metal mesh, would make the place look like a prison.

Art with a job

On a plane flight, Maldonado remembered a metal sculpture he'd seen at the San Antonio Museum of Art: In galvanized steel, artist Carmen Lomas Garza had created a -style picture of her grandfather tending his garden.

Maldonado started sketching. What if the artist created versions that were 14 feet tall and 48 feet wide? Could the soundwalls be giant works of public art?

The answer turned out to be yes. So far, two of the four artwalls have been installed: one is an expanded version of the grandpa-in-the-garden work that Maldonado saw in San Antonio; another shows a Mexican-style birthday serenade.

Garza's walls would be delightful if they were only art for art's sake. They help define their neighborhood, the heavily Mexican-American East End. They look great from the freeway as



you whiz by at 70 mph. They look just as great from inside the complex, where their shadows make lovely, changing patterns on the decked floor between the artwalls and the apartment buildings.

But it makes me happy that they're also highly functional sound barriers: Art with a job to do.

The whole Brays Crossing complex is like that. It's an excellent, problem-solving piece of architecture, a set of buildings that not only functions well but lifts your mood a little every time you see it. I suspect that the project will win architecture and urban-design awards — just like its New Hope older sibling, Canal Street Apartments by architect Val Glitsch.

But Brays Crossing is much more than an architectural exercise. It's a place that gives people their dignity, a home that feels good to come home to. Last week, as the first tenants moved into their much-needed apartments, the architecture stopped being just lovely to look at. It started doing its job.