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Developers, Nonprofits Work to Create Shelters

BY MARC MARGULIES, AIA & TOM LORELLO

Founded in 1974, non-profit organization Shelter, Inc. was built on the belief that providing affordable housing to families and individuals as quickly as possible, along with intensive support services, is the solution to ending homelessness. To help achieve this goal, the Cambridge, Mass.-based organization teams with companies and organizations in the local real estate industry who share their concern and interest in providing housing for all.

Working together, the design, construction and real estate communities provide their expertise to help organizations like Shelter, Inc. develop affordable housing solutions and mitigate the devastating impact of homelessness. The full-time staff at these organizations are primarily social workers, who are often inexperienced in real estate strategy and process. Design, construction and real

estate professionals who serve on a Board of Directors, a building committee or volunteer their time for a specific project provide a wealth of knowledge and experience that is a significant aid to these organizations in their fight against homelessness.

Speed is of the Essence

Organizations like Shelter, Inc. are often faced with the challenge of competing with private real estate developers to obtain a property that could be used for affordable housing or shelter for the homeless. Private developers can typically act much more quickly to purchase property, while non-profits undergo the timely process of consulting with their Board of Directors and securing funding through private donations or public grants.

Recently, Shelter, Inc. was able to purchase a house in Cambridge, Mass. that will be converted to single-room

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Shelter Inc., a nonprofit based in Cambridge, Mass., renovated a Cambridge house in its efforts to address the issue of homelessness. The design community can help nonprofit organizations navigate the design process to tackle such projects.

housing for homeless women. In this case, a private developer worked in their favor – the developer viewed the site and, when he realized it would be perfect for Shelter, Inc., he made a down payment to take the property off the market and contributed further towards the purchase of the house.

The building is currently under renovation and, when it is complete in the spring of 2008, it will provide a home for 13 women who are now living in emergency shelters or on the streets of Cambridge. Each woman will receive her own room, and a staff member will work intensively with each tenant to get her the help she needs, including education, job training and placement, and medical services.

Unique Challenges

Developing housing to get people off the street poses different challenges than simply designing a house. There is a desire to accommodate individuals and families, and each situation requires a different type of unit. For individuals, a single-occupancy room with a private or shared bathroom is most appropriate. Single room occupancy facilities (SROs) should also include communal space to prevent individuals from suffering from isolation.

However, families and children are the most affected by homelessness. On any given night, there are more than 5,000 homeless individuals in Greater Boston – more than 3,000 of those people are children. Family shelters are philosophically different from SROs—a family shelter should not separate residents into individual rooms, especially when there are young children involved, nor should it squeeze an entire family into a single room. Family housing also needs to provide day care facilities in a setting that still allows families to feel like they're living in a home-like environment.

In addition to accommodating individuals and families appropriately, there are a number of regulations to follow and regulatory agencies that must be involved in the design of any shelter facility. Architects are required to adhere to specific requirements related to room size, common areas, support spaces, housing for case managers, and egress. For example, bedrooms are required to be 120 square feet, including a closet, to be acceptable to DSS (Department of Social Services). Single Room Occupancy (SRO) dwellings are required to be fully sprinklered, even though the facility may be no more than a large house.

Ultimately, the best solution is to provide an arrangement of rooms, bathrooms and common areas that provide flexibility, and allow the professionals who run the

shelter options for the best use of the space. This requires understanding the case or house manager's challenges in determining the best room configurations for this fluid and diverse client base.

Realizing the Vision

Throughout any real estate project, architects can conduct a thorough study of existing conditions and determine if the building is well maintained, and what renovations or modifications need to be made. They can also advise whether the best course of action is to tear down the existing property and build a new one, or if renovation is the better option. Design professionals are used to seeing beyond what exists today and can imagine the possibilities. Having someone with such experience to visit and evaluate potential properties is a huge asset to organizations like Shelter, Inc.

An architect's proposed design and layout is an essential tool in obtaining approval from the various agencies that must review any proposed building project, such as the fire department, building inspector, Department of Social Services, and funding agencies. These graphic representations can quickly and clearly explain a proposed design, describe project objectives, illustrate how the project fits into local zoning regulations, and how life safety issues will be addressed – all important aspects of obtaining approval to build.

A sketch or rendering is also a useful tool in fundraising. A realistic image of what the finished building will look like set into the surrounding environment helps potential donors envision where their money will be going. Charitable contributions can then be used to name programs, rooms or the building itself.

Working together, the real estate community and organizations like Shelter, Inc. can make a real difference in the fight to end homelessness.

About the Authors

Marc Margulies, AIA is principal of Margulies & Associates (www.margulies.com), one of Boston's most innovative architectural and interior design firms. He has volunteered his time and expertise with Shelter, Inc. since 1993.

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