



Pleasant View Gardens,
axonometric view of site plan
Graphic: Torti Gallas/CHK

It is a measure of the absolute failure of previous federal public housing policy that a project as modest and unassuming as Pleasant View Gardens in Baltimore is publicly hailed as a national model and given an award for excellence in urban design by the American Institute of Architects.

Pleasant View Gardens represents the first generation of public housing projects completed under HOPE VI, the \$1.5 billion program launched in 1994 by then Secretary of Housing Henry Cisneros. HOPE VI, which is being implemented in thirty-six cities, involves the demolition of 1950s-era, high-rise public housing and its replacement with single-family homes, usually townhouses.

It is an exaggeration to call Pleasant View Gardens a model; after all, comparable projects have been completed in Atlanta, St. Louis, Chicago, Pittsburgh and Seattle. Still, there is no doubt that the Baltimore project represents an important experiment in the vexing problem of housing the nation's poor.

Pleasant View Gardens is located on 21.5 acres, immediately east of downtown Baltimore. Until a few

years ago, this place was called Lafayette Courts and consisted of six identical, high-rise slabs and seventeen low-rise buildings, arranged on a superblock in approved Bauhaus fashion. Lafayette Courts was built to replace dilapidated rowhouses; eventually, it, too, became dilapidated, and worse: violent and dangerous, one-third of its units abandoned. In August, 1995, the entire project was demolished. Pleasant View Gardens took its place.

My first impression of Pleasant View Gardens was, well, pleasant. The two-story, predominantly brick, sixteen-foot-wide rowhouses line the sidewalks, as is common in Baltimore. There are even stoops. But they are concrete, not marble or limestone, as is typical elsewhere in the city. Other construction details are simple, too, often crude; there is nothing fancy about this housing. The simplified Georgian vernacular of concrete lintels, vertical windows and paneled front doors is attractive. Still, the repetitive street facades, entirely brick, are a little monotonous. The rear of the houses, a mixture of brick and vinyl siding, is livelier.

Although these rowhouses have been described as traditional, the layout of Pleasant View Gardens is not a conventional street grid. The project contains a short boulevard, an octagonal square and a sort of mews. In addition, there are several small, and one large, common green spaces in the backs of the houses.

I find the variety of streets unconvincing. The scale of the houses at Pleasant View is too small to successfully define the square; the boulevard strikes me as a little pretentious. It all reminds me of Seaside, Fl., whose assortment of urban street types, one of each, jammed into a tiny resort village seems more like a contrived urban sampler than a cohesive plan.

The common green spaces at Pleasant View Gardens, on the other hand, are successful. It was a drizzly, January morning when I walked around, and not many people about, but I could imagine that these places are active on summer evenings and weekends. Incidentally, that a stranger could walk around an American public housing project in 1999, taking photographs and feeling entirely comfortable, is a measure of what has been accomplished at Pleasant View.

Accomplished at a price: Lafayette Courts contained 807 units; Pleasant View Gardens contains only 228 rowhouses. It is true that the project now includes 110 apartments for elderly in a four-story building, a day-care facility, a recreation building, a community center and an outpatient clinic operated by the Greater Baltimore Medical Center. Nevertheless, the majority of the site is devoted to single-family housing. It achieves a gross density, according to my calculation, of about nineteen units per acre, half the previous density. This is still higher than, say, Kentlands, which has a gross density of only about thirteen units per acre. But Kentlands is a suburban community, with large houses and lots, and with a third of the site devoted to open space, including a lake.

It is not clear that the low density of Pleasant View Gardens is a good thing. Walking around, I felt that the spaces were a little too loose, a little too open; some of the streets were too wide. Higher density and greater compactness would have helped.

The Congress for the New Urbanism deserves much of the credit for the turnaround in the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's approach to public housing that led to the HOPE VI initiative, and to projects like Pleasant View Gardens. The rejection of Modernist urban design principles and the emphasis on neighborhoods with traditional streets and houses is standard CNU fare. So is the traditional architectural style of the modest homes (whose average cost was about \$100,000), which resemble low-priced starter homes in the conventional housing market.

Public housing has often been a vehicle for stylistic architectural experiments—in Germany and France it still is. Fortunately, that is not the case here. Pleasant View Gardens, like many private-sector Traditional Neighborhood Developments, is imaginatively planned but it also exhibits a resolute adherence to conservative, well-known—and well-liked—domestic typologies.

The future residents told the architects that they wanted "houses just like everybody else has." But Pleasant View Gardens is hardly an ordinary neighborhood. There is a police substation in the community



View of street edge and corner along main square, looking south. Photo: Torti Gallas/CHK

center and video cameras attached to the eaves of the houses. The centerpiece of the project is not a church but a city-run community center, staffed by city workers, where there are classes in job training and future homeownership. There are rules about garbage—a wheeled plastic container stands in each backyard. Tenants are responsible for maintaining these backyards. These tenants are carefully screened by the Housing Authority of Baltimore City to achieve a mix of welfare and working families. In other words, there is a recognition, finally, that housing the poor involves more than providing shelter. It is an expensive recognition, of course, but one that forms the important foundation of the HOPE VI strategy.

The other important goal of HOPE VI projects is to break down the concentration of poverty typified by previous public housing projects. Pleasant View Gardens has moved modestly in this direction (several future projects in Baltimore will include an aggressive mix of public and market housing). Twenty-seven of the rowhouses have been sold, at subsidized prices, to qualifying low-income buyers. The plan is that as tenants' financial situations improve they, too, can become owners and purchase their homes. At that point, the promise incorporated in the neighborhood design of Pleasant View Gardens may begin to become a reality.